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Re-imaging the Female Character in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

The cultural exclusion of the female has invariably been viewed from a specific privileged cultural perspective in postcolonial and feminist theories. Often, patriarchy and misogynist subjugation of the female subject have been viewed by many cultures in postcolonial literature as major forms of female exclusion. The early African male writers have particularly been accused of creating their female characters in a subordinate role that excludes them. This paper examines the construction of the Igbo female character's modern and traditional spaces in Chinua Achebe's ***Anthills of the Savannah*** (1987) *through a feminist phenomenological framework. The paper argues that it is difficult to pin down an aspect of cultural material that completely excludes an Igbo female when viewed from a culture outside her own. The paper concludes that because the term 'exclusion' is as fluid as the term 'culture' itself, reading a female exclusion in the text should be appreciated from the Igbo cultural perspective because locating the design of a particular cultural issue in one culture is differently realised in another culture.*

Keywords: Exclusion, Cultural difference, Phenomenology, Traditional, Modern spaces.

Introduction

The creation of 'womanbeing and womanself' (Egejuru, 1997) in the African novel has generated diatribes between the African feminist critics and writers and their male counterparts. These terms denote the manner female characters live a life of inequality with, and dominance by, men in a subordinating position based on the notion that they are weaker than men and thus should live under their protection and guidance (Egejuru, 2011). Florence Stratton calls this an 'exclusionary practice', a process in which female characters are given a subordinating and secondary role in the novel space (Stratton, 1994, pp. 22-38).

The creation of subordinating female characters in the male literary tradition remains a fundamental aspect of African literary and feminist criticism right from the emergence of the African novel. According to Jones

et al (1987), African male writers present their women characters in two ways: by not presenting them in their totality or by creating them with stereotypes. In both ways, issues that affected them as characters in a novel's space are mostly confined to 'polygamy, childbearing, motherhood, and subordination' to the males as wives, sisters, or daughters (Jones et al, 1987, p. 2).

The focuses of this paper are the manner in which Achebe constructs his female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), published in the same year Jones *et al* made the claim, and by placing the discussion within the discourse of politics of cultural difference in postcolonial theorisation. The paper also focuses on how Achebe conflates the mythological world of the Igbo woman and her post-independent social reality as one unit of space to project her agency through the lens of a feminist phenomenology (Fisher, 2010; Shües *et al*, 2011). Paul Ricœur's phenomenological model is combined with feminist criticism as the framework for the paper. Max van Manen reveals that Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology studies the interaction between 'narrativity and temporality' and the manner in which 'human meanings' could be explored through myth, religion, art, and language (Manen, 2011). Narayan Prasad Kafle also reveals that a hermeneutic phenomenology, such as Ricœur's, mainly 'focused on the subjective experience of individuals and groups' (Kafle, 2011, p. 186) because meanings to a phenomenon are not always given directly as they are often imbricated within the paraphernalia of the given culture. Therefore, motifs about the Igbo female exclusion revealed through the diversity of speech types and images created by Achebe in the novel, connected to female place and position, are examined in the paper. These are explored through Ricœur's theory of time and narration which emphasises the function of language as in storytelling in the analysis of literary texts. Sue Vice considered this approach a vital means of gaining access to the understanding of the specifics of any novel (Vice, 1997, p.2). Ricœur's largely used literary texts to apply and test his ethical and philosophical concerns and so the application of his model could be relevant to the analysis of Igbo female subordination and exclusion in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Achebe on his Creation of Female Characters

Chinua Achebe is one of the most widely indicted male novelists accused of creating their female characters in subordinate roles. Critics, particularly, accused him of creating a stereotyped role for his female

characters in his trilogy – *Things Fall Apart* (1958)*, No Longer at Ease* (1960), and *Arrow of God* (1964). According to Ode Ogede, 'Achebe is specifically accused of placing women in subservient roles; fashioning women in motherhood roles; consigning them to menial domestic duties; or only giving them power as priestesses or as mythological figures' (Ogede, 2007, p. 100). As Florence Stratton observes, the accusation is substantiated by his apparent approval of chauvinistic attitudes in his male characters in their repression of the female characters as their daughters or wives.

Things Fall Apart received the highest criticism for Achebe's creation of such male characters with excessive power. In this novel, Okonkwo beats his wife Ojiugo and treats other women with a degree of misogyny and chauvinism. Florence Stratton states that Achebe is charged with portraying female characters under traditional patriarchal bondage that subjects and represses them, including even making decisions that affect their lives based on the provisions of the culture in the novel (Stratton, 1994). The same trend is presented in his subsequent two novels, where women are not given prominence (Stratton, 1994, pp. 22-38). Such portrayal of women by Achebe has generated critical reviews, counter texts, and pastiches with the aim to "recreate" the female character's image, which he allegedly portrayed in a negative light. Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) is an earlier novel that critics see as creating a strong female character to 'write back' (Ashcroft, et al., 1989) to Achebe's female characterisation (Odoi, 2014; Khani, 1993).

Some critics, however, defended Achebe's female characterisation by suggesting that he only documents the anthropological and realistic representations of the agency of the Igbo women within the structures of the culture in his fiction. They stated that he presents exactly how the pre-colonial Igbo culture reflects such cultural practices as marriage, domesticity, childbearing and other gendered roles, as obtained at that period, rather than forming them in his fictional space. So long as most postcolonial fiction is taken as historical and cultural documents showcasing the African cultural heritage, such critics argued that the important thing is "what" Achebe is drawing from "where" not "how" he endorses or supports such cultural heritage. As Ode Ogede opined, 'critics who accuse Achebe of projecting disempowering images of women are applying Western standards of authority entirely remote and alien to the Igbos' (Ogede, 2007, p. 101). This is supported

by Ify Amadiume who also argued that in traditional Igbo society, women do not oppose patriarchal constructions according to the custom and do not fight for equality with the menfolk in all spheres but rather clamour for the right to occupy their domestic and public domains (Amadueme, 2015). Ode Ogede further claimed that the 'discussions of portraits of women in Achebe's fiction are often influenced by preconceived notions that both gender bias and lack of talent generally prevent male authors from creating authentic, convincing female characters' (Ogede, 2007, p. 100). Therefore, Achebe should not be accused of presenting the reality of his culture in his fiction. His creation of female characters should be viewed not only through gendered but also through the historical and cultural reality of his fictional Igbo society.

The Characterisation of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*

One obvious construction of the character of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* that is certain is that she is different from some female characters in Achebe's earlier novels. She is different from Okonkwo's wives who are silenced under his tight patriarchal grip in *Things Fall Apart*. She is different from Ezeulu's wife who is beaten, which made the womenfolk threaten a sexual strike with their husbands as a form of protest in *Arrow of God*. With the new image of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Umelo Ojinmah opines that 'Achebe believes that the time is now for the new nations of Africa to invoke the female principle' (Ojinmah, 1990, p.103). While Beatrice's glorification may be regarded as atonement for Achebe's past negative depiction of female characters, she is equally presented as a character within the rightful traditional and modern spaces as germane in Igbo culture.

The plot of *Anthills of the Savannah* is not developed in a linear sequence of events but rather through a pattern of episodic plots and revelations. Apart from the authorial voice, Achebe uses the voices of the three main characters who take alternate points-of-view to narrate the story. The set of episodes in the novel have no cause-result relationship yet are united under the same general theme of misuse of power. This forms a structure that becomes complementary to each incidence and makes the novel an organic whole. The eighteen chapters in the novel are narrated through different points of view and focalisation on the three main characters and the author. Some of the points of view are in the first-person, others in the third-person while some of the chapters are focalised or titled with the names of the characters. Each of

these characters explores the character of another for the reader and they all act as "witnesses". For example, Chapter One is titled *First Witness – Christopher Oriko* and Chapter Four as *Second Witness – IkemOsodi*. Chapter Ten, titled *Impetuous Child* (using David Diop's poem "Africa" as an epigram), is narrated by the author but uses Ikem as the focaliser. Beatrice also narrates two chapters and leads in other chapters through her focalisation. This narrative thread disrupts the time and space order of the novel's structure so that the reader needs to re-arrange the order to restore the chaotic plot into a narrative whole, something Ricœur espouses in his time and narration exposition (Ricœur, 1984).

Achebe succeeds in skilfully creating major characters as "real", with a strong philosophy and credible actions through prefiguration to the past, present and future, and associations to their views through allusions and juxtapositions in the novel. The story revolves around the misuse of power in Kangan, an imaginary country that apparently, as critics agree, represents Nigeria. It centres on Sam, a military despot and head of state, and the manner in which he interacts with the other principal characters: Chris his friend and his commissioner of information, Ikem a journalist, and Beatrice a strong educated woman who is Chris's friend. Each of these characters has a distinct voice and set of concerns, and it is through their varied voices that the novel explores the various questions and opinions on the cultural spaces of women as female characters.

An important male voice about the female space in the novel is provided through Ikem, who appears as the "other I/eye" of Achebe as the author: a journalist, a commentator, essayist, poet, a storyteller, a writer. He voices views that may apparently be Achebe's but he is a bit impetuous in attacking the misuse of power, which costs him his life. Like Achebe, Ikem initially 'excluded women from the public spheres' (p.96), in the same manner Achebe is accused of doing. When Beatrice, as the representative of the female characters of Achebe, tells Ikem that 'he has no clear role for women in his political thinking', he replies 'You told me a couple of years ago, do you remember, that my thoughts were unclear and reactionary on the role of the modern woman in our society' (p.96). He then goes on to reveal that 'the original oppression of women was based on crude denigration' (p. 97) and that although women are the 'biggest single group of oppressed people in the world' still there 'is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed' (pp. 98-99).

In many more dialectics of Ikem through editorials, poems, letters, and conversations with Beatrice, Achebe defends the non-exclusion of women as a "single group" in many cultural, political, and economic spheres in the novel.

Beatrice is the major female voice in the novel. She is the protagonist female character that survives the excesses and brutality of Sam and who takes up the traditional position of females in Igbo cosmology as depicted in their mythology. This is further demonstrated through boundaries of speech types. Through Beatrice, Achebe as the author's voice incorporates and juxtaposes the traditional oral and modern novelistic narration through religious diatribes, folktales or storytelling, legends, and mythology to demonstrate how Igbo women occupied their rightful places as mythological symbols in the past as well as occupy modern political spaces in the novel. The design of their spaces is constructed in the traditional space through recourse to legends, mythology, religious exegesis, and history, as well as in the modern space through language, status, and inversion of cultural roles.

The Construction of Traditional Female Spaces

The narrative process of the story in *Anthills of the Savannah* shows an interaction between the past, present, and future worlds of the females, both in their surreal and idealistic forms, as postulated in Ricœur's time and narration (Ricœur, 1984). Paul Ricœur's phenomenology model comprises textual interpretation that includes spheres such as mythology, religious exegesis, theory of metaphor, and narrative theory, which are employed by Achebe in the narrative discourse and the female characterisation of Beatrice in the novel. These features are examined as basic structures of textual analysis in this paper.

Religions and Prefiguration

Females were/are accorded both repressive and liberating positions through traditional and modern religious discourse within the Igbo cosmology in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Igbo traditional lore accuses womenfolk of causing the separation of the earth from the sky in the traditional myth. Achebe provides the Igbo traditional account for this, stating that at the beginning of time, the sky and the earth were close together. It was a woman who provoked the sky when she banged the top end of her pestle as she pounded millet, or when she 'wiped her kitchen hand on the sky face', or when she always cut a piece of the sky to put in her soup, which made the sky to finally move up in

anger thereby taking the supreme God away with it (p. 98). The narrator reveals that Igbo ancestors 'without the benefit of hearing about the Old Testament made the very same story differing only in local colour and blamed the woes of man on the woman' (p.98). The story of Eve in the Christian Old Testament, presented as the beginning of the woe that befell a man, is juxtaposed with how 'the idea came to Man to turn his spouse into the very Mother of God' and without the knowledge of the New Testament again, the Igbo culture identifies the woman as Nneka 'Mother is supreme' (p. 98). Rhonda Cobham shows how such reimaging of the female abound between Achebe's *Things fall apart* Igbo cosmology and Christianity through a parallel connection between the character of Okonkwo for sacrificing Ikemefuna and himself, and Abraham for sacrificing his son as well as Jesus for sacrificing himself for the community (Cobham, 2003).

Legends, Mythology, and Allusion

Traditional female cultural space in *Anthills of the Savannah* is further mediated through the myth of the goddess Idemili and the myth of her origin (pp.102-105). According to the traditional mythology, it is Idemili that clothed the "naked" body of power and its destruction and brings life by allowing the river to flow through the community (p.103). This exalted and supreme position of Idemili shows that it is the woman who reorganises the world that men had turned into disarray. It is the woman also who brings and gives life and saves humanity.

But in a metaphoric twist, the traditional name of Beatrice, *Nwanyibuife*, loosely translated as 'a female is also something' (p. 87), becomes a symbol of the subversion of the female gender in the culture that smacks of the usual misogynist tendencies of male-child preference. Beatrice reveals that her 'mother bore [her] a huge grudge because [she] was a girl – her fifth in a row' and had 'desperately prayed for a boy' to give to her [Beatrice's] father' (p.87). In the end, the name Nwanyibuife lived up to its true meaning because Beatrice rises above the probable cynical connotations of the name, which may either be indicative that her parents accept her reluctantly as a female who is better than nothing, or better still, she is something because she is better than any other thing as a woman. Eventually, she becomes the 'womanbeing' (Egejuru, 2011) who is better than any other being. Whatever the sense her name connotes, Beatrice proves, in the end, to be a 'male daughter' (Amadume, 2015).

As a narrator of one of the chapters, Beatrice makes allusions to the traditional religion and to the Biblical and Hindu beliefs in order to reveal the manner in which the space of the female is designed through religion. When Sam attempts to sexually objectify her, Beatrice reveals, 'I did it shamelessly. I cheapened myself. God! I did it to your glory like the dancer in a Hindu temple. Like Esther, oh yes like Esther for my long-suffering people' (p.81). A representation of how girls dance at Hindu temples and how the Biblical Esther used her femininity to save her people (Bible, Esther: 2-10) is pertinent in order to get the true picture of Beatrice's and other similar women's positions in halting excessive power. However, like Esther, the intelligent, discreet wife of King Xerxes who saved her Jewish people from the first recorded holocaust, Beatrice eventually also serves the same purpose in the novel with her responses to Sam's excesses.

Allusion to traditional mythological stories shows how significant storytelling is in negotiating female cultural spaces in Igbo culture. Storytelling discourse is a very good phenomenological tool as argued by Ricœur (1984). This is employed to discuss the politics of power and power relation in *Anthills of the Savannah* in many instances. The Abazon leader's story about the tortoise and the leopard wrestling is an example illustrating the idea of struggle even in the face of suppression. Through an intertextual allusion, Beatrice compares herself to Chielo of Achebe's earlier novel, when she reveals that she feels 'like Chielo in the novel, the Priestess and Prophetess of the Hills and the Caves' (p. 114). Chielo is a priestess of Emuafia in 'the novel' (which is *Things Fall Apart*) who is dedicated to the oracle of the goddess Agbala. She is a widow with two children and also a good friend of Okonkwo's third wife, Ekwefi. She is so fond of Ezinma, the only surviving child of Ekwefi whom Okonkwo loves but wishes she were a boy, which again brings the idea of male preference in the culture.

The legends of Nwakibie and Idemili are all good techniques of using the traditional storytelling technique to buttress power that suppresses and glorifies women at the same time (pp. 102-105). The Idemili and Nwakibie story within the Igbo cosmology culturally and religiously valorised women over men according to tradition. If a man wants to take the traditional *ozo* chieftaincy title he must inform Idemili, the 'Daughter of the Almighty' (p. 103) about his ambition, and he must be 'accompanied by his daughter or, if he has only sons, by the daughter of a kinsman; but a daughter it must be' (p.

103). And when Nwakibie betrays the covenant in his story by exploiting a hapless widow, his end is eventually juxtaposed with that of Sam who also misuses power.

The Construction of Modern Igbo Female Space

The title of the novel, 'Anthills of the Savannah' is a significant reference to the position of Beatrice in the modern space. She is equated with an anthill found in the savannah that yearly survives all forms of destruction from wind to wildfires and remains strong. In the modern context, it is Beatrice who calls Sam to order in a way Idemili would do in the traditional space, and she is the only major character that survives the brushfire that consumes all the other major characters. She fearlessly opposes Sam directly to his face, something the other male characters could not dare do, and she lives on after him and all the other major male characters. Beatrice represents the future hope for the society re-imagined through formal education, status, and the reversal of traditional gender roles.

Education and Status

Within the modern spheres in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the female space is negotiated through language and education. Beatrice was born *Nwanyibuife* but is baptised Beatrice and sent to the formal school, which breaks down her traditional background and role in the community. The new role she acquires as an educated woman, therefore, shuts and excludes other women within the society who don't have such opportunity and create a case of 'womanself' (Egejuru, 1997). Ironically, the modern social status gained by Beatrice through her newfound education replaces the same position that she could have enjoyed were she to remain in her traditional priesthood role as Nwanyibuife. It is represented as being the modern ladder to mediate for the rightful cultural spaces of women in the novel, just as priesthood in traditional religion specifically offered them in the past. Different times for women elevation are, therefore, presented differently with regard to exclusion in the narration.

For the modern Igbo woman, education is liberating in one arena and oppressing in another through the English language. The language of Agatha, Beatrice's maid, is rendered in the Nigerian pidgin English to show her subservient status to Beatrice, her Mistress, although they are all Igbo females within the same cultural space. Elewa, Ikem's local girlfriend, also always

speaks in the same "pidgin" as Agatha does. Beatrice as an educated woman, however, speaks Standard English. The "power relation" between the elites or the "been-tos" and the uneducated is, therefore, differentiated by their use of language. Agatha and Elewa are excluded from certain spheres which Beatrice enjoys because of language and education.

Unlike Elewa and Agatha, Beatrice acquires a new class and status with a First-class B.A English degree from England, which enables her to get a lucrative position in the government. She, therefore, becomes socially and economically independent. This is invariably what gives her the effrontery to challenge Sam and bring him to order. She even challenges Ms. Cranford, the symbol of Western woman and the "norm", when she asks the American lady journalist, who emasculates and lectures Sam and the other dignitaries at the Presidential dinner about foreign debt, whether she will behave the same way to her American president. She also asks Med Medico the same question: "Tell me, would you walk up to your Queen and say, "Hi, Elizabeth?" (p. 59). But Elewa and Agatha never get the chance to assert their liberty and womanhood as Beatrice does because they have no formal education.

Moreover, despite the apparent higher status that Beatrice acquired through education, she rejects the idea that her determination to oppose the 'chauvinist bullshit' (p. 88) or the patriarchal idea that 'every woman wants a man to complete her as a woman' is an idea she derived from "Women's Lib" (p. 88), which she might have picked up while being educated in England. She reveals that the early male chauvinism in her father's house had been her formative experience of patriarchy: one which made her to independently develop a thick skin early enough. In a way, Beatrice is saying the struggle is inherently indigenous and not borrowed from the Western feminist idea of women's liberation. Education to her is not what gives her freedom to fight for space but it's the community in which she grows up that does so.

Metaphor of Reversal

In Igbo culture, females do not preside over naming ceremonies for babies but Beatrice breaks that special preserve within the male domain. This symbolises a female's sustainable assumption of roles specifically exclusive to the males in the modern space. She eventually takes over the patriarchal roles played by men in naming Elewa's baby girl at the end of the novel. In addition to the Biblical glorification of the woman in modern religion as the Mother of God,

the reversal of gender roles is also presented through another prefiguration to the Christian religion:

> There was an Old Testament prophet who named his son The-remnant-shall-return. They must have lived in times like this. We have a different metaphor, though; we have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child Amaechina: May-the-path-never-close. Ama for short (p. 222).

The name "Amaechina" is culturally reserved for male babies only but Beatrice gives it to a female to make her yet another 'male daughter' (Amadume, 2015), and to de-gender naming generally within the cultural space.

More importantly, Beatrice, herself, plays an ambivalent character to herself through the traditional and modern space. She was born as the reincarnation of a priestess but a new Christian identity through naming alters her earlier self and so she 'came to barely knowing who she was' (p105). Beatrice further resists this idea of looking up to be a woman like Chielo who is the last resort. She further disproves making the position of women as last resort with another intertextual allusion to the female characters in Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Woods* (1960) to show this resistance to the exclusion of women in the schemes of things until every other thing has failed:

> But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late! (pp. 91-92).

These allusions to stories in the modern novelistic discourse and Biblical account in order to recreate the spaces women occupied in relation to men are ways of showing that women are never excluded all the time. In fact, they are considered a last resort when and where the men have failed. They are the Special Forces that the modern military usually keeps for the final assault. Outside fictional spaces, women have proven to be the best last resort

politically and economically in Africa. The presidents in Liberia and Tanzania, Sirleaf Johnson and Samia Suluhu Hassan, respectively**,** are good examples.

It is apparent, therefore, that in order to construct women's cultural spaces as characters, Achebe makes use of associations from, and juxtaposition of, both modern and traditional options. Through the depiction of Beatrice as a strong character, women are thus given a centre stage and voice in his novel. Her glorification as the protagonist answers those who claim that his female characters are silenced speakers in his literary spaces. The character of Beatrice is different from some female characters in Achebe's earlier novels and her exaltation may be regarded as atonement for Achebe's past negative depiction of female characters as objects through "redesigning" her identity as a female subject in relation to gender and sexual roles. Nevertheless, she still occupies her rightful traditional and modern spaces as the culture provides, not as Achebe fashioned.

Conclusion

By mediating between the past and the present worlds, Achebe presents a strong female character whose identity is created out of her culture. As Spivak (1985) rightly observes, there is always a difference in perception of cultural oppression because what is liberating in one arena can act as oppressing in another. Achebe demonstrates this in his design of Beatrice within her cultural spaces in the Igbo community.

One is tempted to add that the earlier colonial civilisation that made "things fall apart" in Achebe's Igbo community identified the traditional culture as primitive because the natives walked naked. The "norm" for the civilization, then, was to wear cloth and cover nakedness. That was despite Idemili doing that for the community by 'wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty' (p.102) as demonstrated in Igbo cosmology in the novel. But like the widening gyre in W. B. Yeats's poem, 'The Second Coming', which inspired the title of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Lynskey, 2020), the same civilised norm of covering nakedness is, in some cases, now considered a shackle in the Western culture.

When the chairman of the occasion during the speech to the university students in *Anthills of the Savannah* tells Ikem 'writers in the Third World context must not stop at the stage of documenting social problems but move to the higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions', Ikem responds that

'writersdon't give prescriptions. They give headaches!' (p. 161). Achebe's role as a writer is also not to prescribe what is appropriate for the Igbo culture as regards the exclusion of women but to present the picture as it is for the reader's exegesis.

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