

# **Towards a post-gendered and genuinely post-colonial worldview in African literature: an overview and the case of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah***

***Damazio Mfune-Mwanjakwa***

## **Writing, literature and the portrayal of the sexes**

Where literature and society are concerned, excepting for fairy tales of the Cinderella type and some of what has come to be known as magical realist fiction, the presentation of the characters in works of literature will always be consonant with such characters' position in society and the roles they play and value a particular society attaches to those roles. If there is a clear cut and rigid gendered, class, racial, etc. division of roles and lifestyle these will of necessity be reflected in that particular people's literature. This is because, together with other forms of artistic expression, literature both embodies and shapes a people's metaphysics i.e. their worldview. This is not to suppose that the two spheres exist in a positivistic and deterministic way as in vulgar realist or naturalist assumptions - it doesn't need mentioning how acutely reductive an approach to humanity that would be. As such alongside the 'normal' portrayal of characters and roles may exist characters that deviate from that norm.

It needs mentioning that there has been observed the world over a very close correlation between gender and literature and the roles that the different sexes play in society both in terms of the portrayal of characters as well as the writing of literature itself. Attempts at understanding the roles and portrayal of women in literature have involved a recuperation of various hidden histories - even of seemingly mundane topics such as "The History of The Housewife" (1992) by Catherine Hall. In that chapter Hall traces the various changes of the socially constructed roles - and consequently positions - of women in Western society from the pre-capitalist feudal society through industrialism and the rise of capitalism. Observes as follows:

[T]he sexual division of labour [roles] is not a rigid division. The activities of men and women are always patterned, and the patterning always reveals relations of domination and subordination in relation to the major productive spheres. But the actual patterns of male and female activities within any one society in the development of its mode of production differs. Women may do no heavy work in one society and only heavy work in another. The way in which the sexual division of labour is defined and decided will depend on both the real relations of sexuality, reproduction and work and the attitudes and beliefs about them. The sexual division of labour is not a given in nature but a constant in history. (p.43)

Hall points out that the doctrine of ‘the separate spheres’ where women were consigned to the private or domestic sphere and men the public sphere of politics, business and even writing, begun only with the rise of industrialism and, in its wake, professional specialisation. Before that each family was a more or less self-contained productive unit such that the division of roles between men and women was not rigid at all: “work was done on the basis of task orientation rather than by way of a rigid and formalised gendered division of labour... Generally there were no frontiers between professional or business life and private life. These activities tended to go on in the same living/working area. The household was the centre both of domestic activity and mercantile activity” (pp.44-48). Hall notes that it was only in the seventeenth century when “services which were performed within the family in a pre-capitalist economy became professionalised... and were taken over by men” (p.51). By the Victorian era the women themselves had internalised this ‘separate spheres’ outlook such that “[m]usic, drawing, painting, French, fancy work, gossip and fashion were the stuff of a Victorian girl’s life - all designed to prepare her to catch a man” (p.64). This chauvinistic division gave rise to economic idleness on the part of women who now took on the status of objects of beauty for the male gaze particularly in the middle and upper classes, ideas which in due course became the dominant in society and filtered down to the other classes as well. At the same time there wasn’t even any provision of formal training and education for women to fit them into the industrialising society (p.62). Hall quotes a Mrs Ellis who writing on the training of girls during the Victorian era argues:

It is sometimes spoken of as a defect in women, that they have less power of abstraction than men; and certainly if they were required to take part in all the occupations of the other sex, it would be so; but for my own

part, I must confess, I never could see it an advantage to any woman, to be capable of abstraction beyond a certain extent...a woman, I would humbly suggest, has no business to be so far absorbed in any purely intellectual pursuit, as not to know when water is boiling over on the fire. (p.64)

It is precisely this dilution of female education that Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) fulminates against in her famous example of Shakespeare's hypothetical sister who, even if she had been of equal genius as her brother, argues Woolf, would never have produced any masterpieces. The backdrop to this argument is that throughout Western history women were denied access to classical education which would have enabled them to write poetry as well since according to the convention of the time to be a poet (which by the way included playwrighting) one had to be familiar with the classics. Writing literature itself had been seen so much as a male preserve such that women's entry into it was marked by hesitancy, ambivalence and secrecy - the last seen in women publishing using male pseudonyms. Such moves by women to enter into what had come to be regarded as male domain were often met with derision and sometimes even hostility. Woolf, mentioned earlier, cites the case of a contemptuous and dismissive male composer to show how much opposed Western men were to women going into what had socially become considered male territory (including writing). The eminent critic is quoted as saying that women's composing is like a dog attempting to walk on his hind legs. He goes on to say that such an attempt by a dog is not done well but one is surprised that it is done at all! (p.4).

To illustrate how ambivalently women regarded getting published, in a book chapter titled "The Silence is Broken" (1990), Josephine Donovan cites the case of one Katherine Philips who was quite dismayed at the fact that an unauthorised version of her poems was published in 1664: "To me...who never writ any line in my life with any intention to have it printed... This is a most cruel accident, and hath cost me a sharp fit of sickness since I heard it"(p.47). According to Donovan, the major breakthrough into the literary tradition for women came with the disregard for the classics as a yardstick for criticism in a post-Cartesian era. And in this it was the novel that became the popular genre for women because "the novel asserts the value of experience of one individual. The experiential details of everyday life [became] legitimate sources of verification (as opposed to citations gleaned from Latin *auctores*)"(p.44).

Yet even with such a breakthrough the hesitancy, ambivalence and secrecy remained and this is perhaps best exemplified in the writing and criticism of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It has been noted that while there are female characters in *Frankenstein* they never speak directly if at all. This is seen to be a result of the author's own inner conflict about mixing up the separate spheres. Writes Johanna Smith (1992:26) in this regard:

Mary's ambivalence toward domesticity and public life are ...seen as being inseparable from the text's ambivalence toward women and language. *Frankenstein* ...is a work made by words of a woman in which women characters never speak directly... The troubled feeling that writing was a masculine activity may...have led Mary Shelley, first, to allow her husband to revise her manuscript version of the novel, bringing it more in line with his Latinate style; later it may have caused her to allow him to revise the novel into one that more clearly taught domestic virtues.

Yet Mary's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, – whom Mary admired greatly - was one of the most vocal at calling for equal rights between men and women. Her uncompromising classic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) is regarded in the western 'canons' as one of the most lucid works on feminist agitation for equality between the sexes. In it Wollstonecraft unequivocally posits that "women in common with men are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties"(p.80) but that male chauvinism thwarts women's efforts through false education and outright barbarism towards them. She Argues: "Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him the gift of reason?" (p.87). Of course in *A Vindication* Wollstonecraft herself swings between looking at women more as 'companions of men' and less as beings in their own right. And it is largely in the former cast that both male and female authors have largely presented their female characters in Western literature.

### **Gender and African writing**

On the African scene things have not been much different either. In her incisive chapter, provocatively titled "How Could *Things Fall Apart* for Whom They Were Not Together?" (1994), Florence Stratton observes that Achebe totally alienates female readers of his seminal novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by presenting female characters or femalehood as such in a very negative light in this text. It is not only Stratton who has a case against Achebe and other male African writers and critics of African literature (the Somalian Nurudin Farah seems to be an

exception to this rule). The list includes such female heavyweights of African literature as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta and others.

Early in a chapter entitled “African Writing and Gender” (1997), Lyn Innes and Caroline Rooney note the marginal status of African women both as characters in and as writers of African literature. They remark: “The title of this chapter may best be spelt out as follows: ‘African Writing...and Gender’. ‘Gender’ would thus appear to be an afterthought or, perhaps, the admission of an omission. This is not only a speculative consideration, for it may be claimed that in historical terms, African women’s writing finds its moment of appointment in the omissions of African men’s writing” (pp.197: 193). The two critics look at African women writing as a ‘beginning again,’ as it sought to correct the false impression created by African male writers and tell them that “women did not hear of culture for the first time from men”(Innes, 1997: 199). In this connection, Ama Ata Aidoo and Zulu Sofola controversially maintain that the hierarchised subjection of women in African societies was a colonial introduction and legacy. Sofola, for instance, says: “With European exposure the African educated person has been led to believe that the female is an afterthought, a wall-flower...[Yet t]here was no area of human endeavour in the traditional system where the woman did not have a role to play. She was very strong and active...In the European system there is absolutely no place for the woman” (quoted in Inness et al. 1997: 205-6).

It has been noted by Innes and Rooney that early African women writing by Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta sought to “recapitulate Achebe’s point of departure, addressing colonial blindspots, while they also address[ed] the blindspots in this very point of departure, with regard to both gender and writing”(1997: 194). These critics note that critics of Achebe’s works have focused more on his anti-colonial stand and “[I]n doing so, such critics have averted their attention from the marginalisation of woman characters in Achebe’s novels, and his failure to give women a voice or place in the creation of an African vision of the reconstruction of the nation and its culture” (1997: 195). Although we will go into the details of the matter, later it may be worth noting at this stage that critics like Ashis Nandy apologise for Achebe’s oversight that “the psychology of colonialism and anti-colonialism produces extreme dichotomies between definitions of the masculine and the feminine; the two terms cannot be

percieved as overlapping” (quoted in Innes. 1997: 196). On the African scene Achebe’s own development in this area will be a point of more focus later in the article.

Other African female writers such as Mariama Ba have deplored the Cartesian link between women and land or body as portrayed in the Negritudist trope of ‘Mother Africa’:

The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us. The Black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proved to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country (quoted. in Innes 1997: 195).

As Innes aptly observes, this presentation of women as passive bodies waiting to be acted upon is true also of most Anglophone literature. In this connection, she mentions works like Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth My Brother* which links the female character Dede to the mythical Mammy water. Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Healers* has the woman character Araba Jesiwa who, after much travail, becomes the symbol of a “fragmented Africa whom the men must carry around, care for and heal; she is both their burden and their hope for salvation”(Innes 1991: 133). In a similar vein, in her autobiography *Call Me Woman* (1985), Ellen Khuzwayo sets out to tell the neglected story of the role of black women in the South African fight for multiracial democracy. She points out that even though women were in the forefront in the struggle right from the early fifties (with the 1957 women’s march on Pretoria), their role has not been fully taken account of. A similar approach is adopted by another South African writer Loretta Ngcobo in the novel *And They Didn’t Die* (1999) where women’s suffering and fortitude during the struggle are highlighted .

In a rather radical reaction to such a marginalised presentation of African women, female authors like Aidoo have resorted to giving a stronger voice to their women characters who appear in most of her stories as major characters ridiculing the presumptuous men who are this time around relegated to the peripheral. This comes across in most of her fiction such as her 1972 novel *Our Sister Killjoy* and in her collection of short stories called *No Sweetness Here* and, more recently, in a novel called *Changes: A Love Story* among others.

As in the case of their European counterparts African female writers have had to write against the heaviest of odds labouring under a double yoke as gendered as well as imperialised so-called “Others”. In a chapter titled “To Be an African Woman Writer – an Overview and a Detail “ (nd.) Aidoo outlines the hurdles put in the path of a female African writer by male writers and critics. She cites an event of March 1985 when a Professor Dieter Riemenschneider gave a lecture on some regional approach to African Literature in Harare when during the two hour lecture the eminent Professor never mentioned a single African woman writer. When this was pointed out to him later, he said he was sorry, but that it had been ‘so natural’ (p.159). Aidoo was so taken aback by this reply she mutters: “ I could have died. It had been natural to forget that quite a bit of modern African literature was produced by women? Why should it be ‘natural’ to forget that some African women had been writing and publishing for as long as some African men writers?” (p.159). In the same article Aidoo mentions other critics such as Neil McEwan, Gerald Moore and even revolutionists like the Nigerian Bolekaja troika Chinweizu et al. who have at one point or another virtually omitted African women writers when writing about African literature.

On her part, maintaining a strong sense of orality in style - which includes anecdotes of engaging gossip - as opposed to idle gossip -, in *No Sweetness Here* (1994) Aidoo deftly ‘gives’ her women characters a voice which very much borders on the art of a ventriloquist. This tactic, where the author hides behind her/his characters by allowing them to speak as if for themselves, is an attempt at circumventing the contested question of representation raised among others by literary and cultural theorists such as Gayatri Spivak.

Another prominent African female writer, the South African Miriam Tlali, while pointing out her privileged status in having a very understanding man for a husband nonetheless points out the difficulties of being doubly oppressed. Writing about her in 1980 Richard Rive notes: “ In South Africa black means trouble, and black woman adds an extra dimension to subjection and oppression. To quote [Tlali’s] grandmother, ‘to say woman is to say pot; to say woman is to say broom” (p.23). Tlali herself particularly hated the South African law that regarded black women as perpetual minors : “By law and by conventional acceptance, the African woman is a perpetual minor. As a result, she is taken for granted by everyone else except by another African woman. Noone really takes her ‘moaning’ about the problems and inconveniences she suffers because noone (or

very few people) *expects* her to say anything about her likes and dislikes, less still, about her very demeaned status right down there at the very base of the social pyramid”(p.26). She relates an incident in which after she had finished her first novel *Muriel at the Metropolitan* (1975) she couldn't at first be allowed to sign her own publishing contract because, by law, she was a minor and it was required that her husband sign on her behalf : “My husband would not sign the contract because he had not written the book and did not see why he should do it for me when I was in full control of all my mental faculties and could read and write. Finally my publishers [Ravan Press] and I decided to go ahead and draw up the agreement anyway and face the consequences”(p.26). This attitude towards women as minors is the effect of 18th and 19th century social and biological Darwinist theories that classed women ( including white women and all the colonized peoples both men and women) at the same level as children on the evolutionary scale or *Great Chain of Being* that stretched from the simplest plant and animal life to the white, upper class, European male.<sup>1</sup>

The once supposedly largely European ‘separate spheres’ doctrine does not spare African women either. In this regard Tlali as follows:

Besides having to write in spite of the fetters bending her like her male colleagues, the African female writer has many additional obstacles to overcome. She has to figure out for herself how to circumvent all male chauvinists who are likely to lash out at her as if she were a challenging force for encroaching and violating the sanctity of their exclusive domain. She has to outsmart the moral paragons, the lawmakers, the preachers and the missionaries (p.26).

According to Tlali not even the white woman (who must rely on the black maid for her leisure) is a sympathizer of the plight of her black sister (p.25).

This last observation brings in the much debated notion of ‘Global Sisterhood’ in feminist studies (i.e. the possibility of the coming together of women globally to overthrow patriarchy) propounded in the late 70s and early 80s. This possibility has come into serious question because of the observation that Western Female writers and Feminists either patronise those in the Third World, or worse still use them for their countries’ imperial project. The notion of ‘Global Sisterhood’ fail to take into account the traditional divides of race, class and international politics. In “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”(1985) which is a

critique of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (as a reaction by a Creole West Indian woman to the first novel ) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gayatri Spivak lashes out at European female writers and feminist critics for not just patronising but literally 'Othering' their Third World counterparts. Zeroing in especially on Bronte's zoological presentation of the West Indian Creole character Bertha Mason who is seen as usurper (when in fact it is her wealth that Rochester – Jane's husband - craves and seeks to disposes her of ) who must be destroyed for the good of her white female counterpart Jane:

In this fictive England, she [Bertha] must play out her role, act out the transformation of her "self" into that fictive Other, set fire to the house and kill herself, so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. I must read this as an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer. At least Rhys sees to it that the woman from the colonies is not sacrificed as an insane animal for her sister's consolidation (p.251).

Yet in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, while trying to right the wrong done to Bertha Mason through the figure of the Creole Antoinette, Rhys herself, in turn, unwittingly consigns the West Indian black woman servant Christophine to the position of Other, pointing to what Spivak regards as the failure of even good intentioned Western feminism to come to the rescue of Third World feminists. She writes: "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (p.253). In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses"(1997) Chandra Mohanty bemoans western feminists simplistic analyses of the Third World situation seen in their reductive collapsing of women of these areas into a homogenous group of people without the slightest regard to their geographical, cultural, temporal, etc. peculiarities, a practice that merely repeats the imperialist mission which suppresses the heterogeneity of the colonised subjects ( p.256). Not even Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism' – forged merely for purposes of struggle - will do for Mohanty who insists on strict specificity. She points out further that: "[T]he resultant homogenisation of class, race, religion, and daily material practices of women in the Third World can create a false sense of the commonality of oppressions,

interests, and struggles between and among women globally. Beyond sisterhood there are still racism, colonialism, and imperialism!” (p.269). In “Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference it makes” (1985), Henry Louis Gates Jr. makes a similar observation regarding the need to pay attention to the “situatedness” of writers and critics.

On the other hand, in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) Aidoo hints at the failure of a simplistic global sisterhood in the tragic relationship between the Ghanaian Sissie and the German Marija where the latter’s attempt to buy (lesbian) love from Sissie (precipitated by her loneliness as her husband is always away working to pay for the house and the cosy furnishings) fails to succeed and, strangely, but not unexpectedly, Sissie feels she has had her revenge on the white world for all the pain it has caused the non-white worlds. But Third World feminists themselves have been at risk of wrongly representing their subaltern sisters more or less repeating what their Western counterparts have been accused of doing to Third World women. In this regard we have already pointed out how Aidoo tries to circumvent this trap (through ventriloquism) while also laying claim to some kind of the ‘mutual affinities’ doctrine because most of the early female writers were still in touch with their subaltern mothers, sisters, cousins, etc. sufficiently enough to present their experiences with a ‘credible’ voice. (Other notable African female writers include Nadine Gordimer, Micere Mugo, Grace Ogot, Bessie Head, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Lauretta Ngcobo and others). But what could be one of the ways out of the discriminatory and oppressive binarist impasse?

### **Achebe’s democratic and ‘androgynous’ solutions**

Chinua Achebe is certainly one of the most well known black African novelists around. His early mission, as has been said over and over again, was to correct the negative image of the black African that Western literature, and, more specifically Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* portrayed. Yet this paragon of African literature has not been beyond criticism as far as the portrayal of women characters in his fiction is concerned. In a very fiercely argued chapter that I alluded to early on, in a book chapter titled “How Could *Things Fall Apart* for Whom They Were Not Together?” - in relation to the position of women in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* - Florence Stratton starts by observing that Achebe set out to restore dignity to the African past and in his own words to show “ that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from

Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity...” (p.24). While acknowledging the validity of the racial politics of Achebe’s early works Stratton seriously questions their sexual politics as she contends: “The question is, however: Does Achebe attempt to restore ‘dignity and respect’ to African women? Does he tell his female readers ‘where the rain began to beat them?’”(p.24). Very early in the essay Stratton searchingly and critically asks: “where in this [novel] is the gendered African reader to locate herself? For while she will immediately recognise the strength and self-assurance of the male culture of Umofia, she will have no such experience of its female culture. Might she not wonder if the abject servitude of women is the hallmark of a ‘civilised society?’”(p.25). She cites various instances of female servitude in *Things Fall Apart*. Indeed, at some point she notes the central role that Okonkwo plays in relation to both racism and gender in the text:

There is substantial critical agreement on Okonkwo’s function in the novel as the embodiment of Umofia’s values. But his character is defined not so much by ‘the subject-object dialectic’ as that dialectic is constituted by the colonial situation Rather it is the relation between Self and Other in a patriarchal situation that defines Okonkwo’s character. Okonkwo provides a classic example of male psychology in a patriarchal society, from the perspective of which women are inferior because of their otherness (p.59).

(As opposed to the inter-subjective ontology that I postulate elsewhere, this Cartesian attitude is comparable to assuming that a part of oneself is superior or inferior to another part because it is different from that part of the same self – which rings hollow, to say the least).<sup>2</sup> In “African Writing and Gender,” Lyn Innes and Caroline Rooney detail the various stages of Achebe’s sidelining of women in his subsequent novels namely *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966). But they do point out, albeit *en passant*, Achebe’s departure from this marginalisation in his 1987 novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. To fully appreciate this departure in Achebe we need to situate a discussion of gender in that novel within a broader discussion of Achebe’s own acute disillusionment with post-colonial Nigeria specifically, and Africa, generally. In Achebe the two phenomena are so closely related as to demand their simultaneous discussion. Here dictatorship and general administrative ineptitude, and men’s oppression of women, are seen as synonymous. Democracy and ‘androgynous genderlessness’ are then offered as ways out.

### **Of ‘immediate’ and ‘remote’ causes of the ‘African’ political malaise**

The section that follows aims to critically discuss the foregoing issues in the novel within the context of the postcolonial discourse. I look at three major issues: Firstly, Achebe’s position on ‘the power and author[ity] of storytelling’. Here I ask and attempt to answer three major questions namely what, according to Achebe, should be the nature of a ‘relevant story’ in the struggle for genuine post-colonialism? What is the significance and potency of such a story in the struggle? And, who owns the nation’s story i.e. whose story truly matters? Secondly, I explore the whys and wherefores of the generally uneasy relationship between writers/intellectuals (as storytellers) and politicians in repressive postcolonial regimes. The main thrust of the discussion here is on the genuine (not party-liner’s or patriot’s) writer’s ‘Socratic’ mission as gadfly with his/her challenge of all claims to certitude - which, unfortunately, the totalitarian claims to be his prerogative. Also I explore why such a writer irritates the would-be revolutionary - whom we could say is, at least potentially, a man of power too. Thirdly I explore the supposed complementary roles of men and women (with emphasis on the woman) Achebe raises in view of the struggle for a genuine post-coloniality. Essentially the section looks at Achebe’s calculated disregard for the previous compartmentalised gender roles to usher in a sort of “genderless” society and exalting those qualities which society generally regards as “feminine” in seeking ways to harness them toward re-establishing what Ikem calls the so much needed “vital inner links with the...dispossessed...” (pp. 140-41).

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### **The intellectual/writer as irritant**

The assertion that Achebe made about the novelist as teacher who shows the people where the rain began to beat them, was too polite a role to carve for the conscientious writer. In fact, it can be argued that Achebe engages in deliberate understatement or doublespeak because in carving out that role he does hint at the role of the writer as more than teacher, but as a gadfly in the Socratician sense. Indeed, as experience came to show, in most newly independent African nations, the writer (Achebe included) came to be viewed by the generally autocratic politician more as an implacable irritant than a mere teacher. The writers adopted the role that was played by the *griot* or the *imbongi* in the traditional lore, intent on reminding the rulers of their moral obligation to those they governed if they

were not to fall into the Fanonian trap of merely replacing the foreign colonialist with an indigenous autocratic elite. Most of these writers paid a heavy price for their chosen role and the African Literary Hall of Fame is occupied by writers most of whom endured the banning of their works, imprisonment, exile and even death. As such, the subject of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, like that of his other four novels that came before it, continues to be the quest for a truly postcolonial era. In this novel, however, the focus is more on what Ikem designates as "immediate causes" of the continuing colonialism than on what [neo]colonialism per se has done to prevent the realisation of such an era for Africa.

As Emmanuel guru succinctly sums up, the story of *Anthills of the Savannah* is about three boyhood friends Sam, Chris and Ikem. In their adulthood Sam is now the ruler of a fictitious country called Kangan and Chris is his commissioner for information in cabinet. Ikem, though not in cabinet, wields immense power in his own right as he belongs to the fourth estate as an editor of *The National Gazette*. These form an uneasy political *coterie* from which Ikem, in his bid to become a champion of the masses, breaks away. It is the conflict between the demands of the friendship dating back to their youth and the commitment to national ideals (with personal ambition thrown in for good measure) that sets the stage for the tragedy and redemption of the story. As regards the former, Ikem tragically pays the ultimate price at the hands of his former colleague Sam and as regards the latter, through Beatrice, who is the modern priestess of the cult of Idemili, patron of artists, the nation at last hopes for a reconciliation of both political and gender polarities that have made it fall apart from the inside.

As Ikem appositely observes in what he calls "a new radicalism" in his speech to university students (while he is serving a suspension from his post as editor of *The National Gazette*), it is naïve to be caught up in the trap of blaming everything on external factors to the total exclusion of internal factors the sorting out of which is crucial before you can even begin to dream of the era of genuine postcoloniality (1988: 158-61). Among the pertinent internal factors Ikem and Beatrice as intellectuals incisively outline in the novel are rampant corruption and gross unproductivity among those who hold public office, and the dictatorial and oligarchic tendencies which, coupled with a retrogressive patriarchal mindset on the question of women's involvement in the running of public affairs, totally exclude the masses in general and women specifically from the decision making

process which is supposed to be an all-inclusive collective enterprise. The inclusion of Beatrice in this novel gives Achebe just the tangential departure he badly needs to redress the gender blindness in his previous novels.

### **The relevant postcolonial/gender story as “Janus” faced**

Midway into the novel, in a very crucial chapter in which are expressed the searching views of the struggle, the old man from the politically and economically marginalized Abazon people (in much the same way that patriarchy marginalizes women), sage-like gives a long speech that touches on the various aspects of any battle. However, he points out that when all is said and done “[i]t is the story that outlives the sound of war-drums and the warrior. It is the story, and not the others, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence” (p.124). In this we see the story and, by extension, the storyteller, as resembling the Roman god of gates and doorways Janus. [This view, as we shall see in later sections, has a counterpart in Elewa’s daughter by Ikem being called Amaechina: (May-the-path-never-close) by the androgynous Beatrice.] Gikandi is quick to note, with regard to the two-way nature of the story, that “[t]he power of the storyteller does not lie simply in his or her mastery of the narrated event; rather, the narrator outlives the events he or she narrates and becomes the avatar of those memories which are crucial to the reinvention of our lives” (1991: 126). We notice in this that the story makes for a critical examination of both the self and the “other” within a given context, not for analysis’ own sake but as a way towards mapping out the course of future action if we and those after us are to avoid “blundering...into the spikes of the cactus fence.” It is precisely in the story’s (and this includes the story of women) capacity to generate critical reflection that its power lies.

Now, we have said that the power of the story lies in its being able to not only look into the past but, like Janus, it should also look forwards. Even at this stage, considered in its totality as a postcolonial and post-gender story, it could be said of Achebe’s *Anthills* that the progression of its ‘story’ does abide by the principles the author himself sets down of a story relevant to the postcolonial moment. The novel moves from political dictatorship/exclusiveness and crippling male chauvinism through critical reflection and subsequent transformation of some of its major characters to a gender-blind new society (‘male’ names for ‘females’?) and hope for political inclusiveness - that is if Beatrice, crucial as she is to the

story, must be viewed as the new ruler or at least as the moderating principle (Idemili) as the story suggests. In that regard, in keeping with what a story ought to do (i.e. give hope), Gikandi observes that “Achebe is eager to transcend the ‘oppressive realistic representation’ which dominates his novel,. . . [because] “[A]rtists should not be the ones to offer despair to society” (1991: 147).

**Author[ity] of storytelling: “This world belongs to the people . . . not to any little caucus . . .” Beatrice (*Anthills*...p. 232)**

Some way into the novel Beatrice rightly charges that Chris and his two friends are monopolising the nation’s story: “. . . you fellows, all three of you, are incredibly conceited. The story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you . . .” (1988: 66). As a counterpoint to the dictatorial and patriarchal tendencies in Kangan’s ruling clique there is evidently a deliberate attempt by Achebe to ‘democratise’ the ‘story’ of the nation in the first place and to delineate ‘authentic’ (because objective) versions from subjective ones in the second place. The reason for the first part, as George Landow observes, is ideological: “. . . the chief axis of the novel [consists in] the movement down the social scale from the elite down to the people”(http://www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/achebe/achebeov.html).<sup>3</sup>

In this connection, comparing and contrasting the narrative techniques of Achebe and Joyce Cary, to whose works Achebe’s novels were directly responding, Lynnes observes that “Whereas Cary chooses a single objective narrative perspective, which leaves no room for the reader to question the narrator’s accuracy of judgement, Achebe’s novels are remarkable for their variety of perspective and involvement of the reader in the questions and issues central to each novel”(1990: 169). She traces this tendency to Achebe’s ‘firm belief’ in the Igbo proverb that “Where something stands, there also something else will stand”(p.169). Achebe democratizes the story through the use not only of “multiple narrators” but also of “multiple discourses”. On this Emmanuel Ngara observes that: “The story is told from the point of view of three characters Chris, Ikem and Beatrice. In addition to these, there is the omniscient narrator who takes over from each one of them at a convenient point” (qtd. in Petersen p. 120). And so we notice that in chapter one it is Chris who is the narrator but the omniscient narrator takes over in the following two chapters, followed by Ikem as narrator in the fourth chapter and then Beatrice in Chapter six and so on and so forth.

Chapter ten even has David Diop's poem "Africa" as an epigraph. In the same democratisation process note should also be taken of the presence of multiple discourses which reflect Kangan's varied social classes: "In Achebe's novel, official language (in the form of decrees) co-exists with the poetic language and intellectual discourse of Ikem, ... the market dialect of Elewa and the taxi drivers [for Achebe believes that] ... the history of the nation - and hence its narrative - is multivalent and heterogeneous' (Gikandi: 138-9). In this regard, Chris who is ever conscious of monopoly on the part of the trio, quickly concurs with Beatrice on the charge she brings against the trio and says: "We tend sometimes to forget that our story is only one of twenty million stories - one synoptic account" (1988: 66-7).

But, what light does Achebe's narrative technique shed on the reflective quest for a truly postcolonial and genderless era? Gikandi links the multiplicity of the narrators and the discourses in the novel to the answering of the question why the earlier liberation stories had failed to achieve what they had hoped for, namely a united nation, with a [single?] national culture. Using Bakhtin's concepts of *ideologues* and *ideologemes* in which

The speaking person in the novel [hence in the nation's story] is always, to one degree or another, an *ideologue* and his words *ideologemes* [and] that each of these strives for social significance [and, we may add, recognition too] he suggests that Achebe seems to point out that it is precisely because earlier stories of liberation posited a single *ideologeme* (in a blind spirit of the hegemony of nation building) denying room (by deliberate exclusion) to any other that doomed them (1991:138-9).

In his classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1967) Frantz Fanon makes a similar observation as Gikandi makes in the quote above on the pitfalls of national consciousness which does not take into account the heterogeneity of society in the fight against oppression and the nation building process that comes after the attainment of freedom.

However, Achebe seems to argue that while it is important to take into account every voice in the postcolonial state or any society, not each one of them is to be trusted until put to the test. In this regard, Ikegami, for instance, notices enough faults in Sam's, Ikem's and Chris's versions of the nation's story to sufficiently warn us of their blindspots if we are to avoid the cactus fence: "Chris and Ikem

are in certain ways very different types of storytellers. Chris is interested in facts . . . He wants to present a story that is credible because it is objective . . . ” (quoted. in Parker 1995: 68). But professing to be a particular type of a person is one thing and living it out faithfully quite another. As such Ikem justifiably doubts Chris’ integrity as a storyteller especially that as Commissioner for Information he has to get his stories tailored to suit Sam. His constant lecturing of Ikem to tone down his editorials is evidence enough for the latter to accuse him of having sold out: “He probably believes that crap too. Quite amazing what even one month in office can do to one” (1988: 35). Ikem, on the other hand, is not any better a storyteller. Well meaning though he is, he exalts passion and propaganda far above its merits: “Passion is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble”(1988: 38). However, in a new twist that shows Achebe’s revisionist preference for the ‘other gender,’ Ikegami points out that it is Beatrice, the anointed of Agwu, who emerges as the only reliable storyteller:

Through Beatrice, Achebe describes a form of storytelling that recognises the necessity and desirability of selectively and purposefully incorporating various ways of telling a story.....Beatrice’s storytelling represents a movement toward a creative amalgamation of facts and passions, past and present, people and ideas ... (Parker, 1995: 76-7).

This balance of elements in Beatrice also shows when she gives the name Amaechina: (May-the-path-never-close) to Ikem’s and Elewa’s child “symbolizing”, so Ikegami asserts, “open access to knowledge, communication between past and present, and once again a unification of apparent opposites, this time by giving a masculine name to a female child. For Beatrice the story always combines different, seemingly irreconcilable, elements in an amalgamation that unifies and yet still preserves the identities of the individual elements” (qtd. in Parker 1995: 78).

We can sum up by pointing out that Achebe’s concern with the need for multiple voices in the state reflects back to what Innes says is his ““firm belief” that no single man or character should assume knowledge . . . that arrogance and pride is the worst of all sins . . . [which] accounts for the failure of his main characters, is the source of his indictment of the British, and also underlies the choice of his narrative technique”(Innes 1990: 169).

But what is the root cause of this postcolonial mess, and how can we rise above the disillusionment and plan for future action as befits the proper ‘story?’ A close look at the novel reveals that the fundamental ‘immediate cause’ for the troubled political situation in the post[neo]colonial era is because power has been dissociated from morality, hence the relevance of the inclusion of the myth of Idemili and its being represented by the female character Beatrice. As Gikandi observes “Achebe seems to feel, as Ikem does, that power has triumphed . . . because it has released itself from morality embodied by Idemili. In this sense, the act of telling stories is an attempt to recover the original relationship between power and morality . . . ” (p.135). Herein, too, comes the relevance of Beatrice as the modern Idemili. But being female Achebe makes her role inextricably tied up with his revised view of women and what, in general, they can contribute to the struggle.

As I have already hinted at above, there seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the radical approach Achebe has adopted in *Anthills* may be the author’s own atonement for his own marginalisation of women characters in his fiction hitherto. In an article titled “Women in Achebe’s world”, Rose Meru observes as follows:

A cursory look at the place of women in Achebe’s other works confirm a diachronic development in his mission as a writer. The inexorable winds of change have caused Achebe, a consummate pragmatist, to make a volte-face. The secret of his revisionist stance can be deduced from the central theme of his two tradition based novels - *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*: In a world of change, whoever is not flexible enough will be swept aside. Profiting from the mistakes of his tragic heroes, Achebe becomes flexible.  
<http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.html> 2003

The exclusion of women as *ideologues* is indeed viewed by Achebe as a grievous error of culture and constitutes a major setback in the struggle for a genuine postcolonial era and hence calls for redress.

Beatrice accuses Chris, Sam and Ikem not only of conceit but also of male chauvinism, especially the latter two. As Innes points out, “Examples of male chauvinism are brought into focus throughout the novel . . . the wife beating which fascinates and revolts Ikem, Beatrice’s painful memories of her mother’s tears and probable beatings behind closed doors, . . . the smug celebration of polygamy by His Excellency. . . ”(Innes 1990: 157).

But, are women any panacea for the ills of Kangan? In his interview with Anna Rutherford regarding the question of gender in *Anthills*, Achebe believes, albeit stereotypically, that they are. Stereotypical because he focuses especially on what he terms the ‘feminine’ qualities of **compassion** and **humaneness**, the absence of which accounts for the absence of “the vital inner links with the dispossessed” (Rutherford 1988: 140-41) He sees these traits as untapped *ideologemes* which could change the way the world is run. He says: “We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of woman the position of Beatrice as a *sensitive* leader of that group is indicative of what I see as necessary in the transition to the kind of society which I think we should be aiming to achieve” (qtd. by Gikandi, 1991: 145, *my emphasis*). Some of these myths that Achebe is referring to are those Ikem draws from both the Judeo-Christian and local theologies all of which present the woman as far removed from the practical day to day running of affairs (Achebe 1988: 97-99). But, using fire to quench fire, Achebe seizes upon the myth of Idemili to set up Beatrice as the modern priestess of Agwu, the patron of artists. We have already justified Beatrice’s position as a legitimate storyteller in the first section. As a way of concluding I may just need to account for her initial hesitation to assume her given role.

By all standards Beatrice at this point in time passes for an example of a truly modern woman who is socially and intellectually at par with her elite male counterparts. For instance, she holds a first class BA Honours in English and is articulate and critical in her analysis of the post-colonial condition in Nigeria and beyond. But she starts off on a very uncertain note: “For...months...I still could not find a way to begin [my story]” (Achebe 1988: 82). We have already noted the ambivalence and hesitancy that afflicts women who break into what are traditionally regarded as male territories. Trying to proffer an explanation for this hesitation, Gikandi says “in spite of her influential role in the affairs of the nation, Beatrice is marginalized because of her gender. As a result her narrative begins by calling attention to its problematics, the failure to find appropriate beginnings” (Gikandi 1991: 146). Indeed in her new role Beatrice has to learn to slough off ‘generations upon generations’ of male chauvinism like a snake does its dead scales living as she (and by extension all the womenfolk) has been doing in a “[w]orld inside a world inside a world without end...” (p. 84). Ultimately though it is in Beatrice’s character that Achebe tries to come up with a sort of the Hegelian

synthesis of the Jungian ‘animus’ (masculine) and ‘anima’ (feminine) principles, with the new character manifesting itself as a character that is androgynous - at once both male and female - that seeks to reconcile within it the multivalent nature of the story of the nation and in a sort of Janus manner. This is illustrated in the naming ceremony of Elewa’s daughter where the baby is christened Amaechina – a ‘male’ name. Gikandi lends weight to this observation when he says “The last chapter of the novel suggests that the new dispensation depends not only on a radical re-thinking of the past but also a redesignating of the forms in which our cultures are represented. The naming of Elewa’s new baby is a narrative (imaginary) resolution to the paradoxes and problems of an ‘alienated history’” (Gikandi 1991: 148). Beatrice is the opposite of the conceited male characters in the story. Unlike with the dictators and male chauvinists, there is neither a sense of certitude nor gender bias about her. The name Amaechina suggests openness and the fact that it is traditionally a “male” name which *she* (and not some male) deliberately gives to a girl ushers in a gender blind society that will put men and women at par as co-fighters. This, it must be admitted, is quite revolutionary and in ascribing it to the female sex, albeit stereotypically so, Achebe shows his commitment towards a totally new thinking on the part of society at large in the struggle towards genuine socio-political freedom in the post-colonial state.

## Notes

1. see Anne McClintock’s “Maidens, maps and mines: King Solomon’s Mines and the reinvention of patriarchy in colonial South Africa” In: Walker Cheryl (ed) *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990).
2. See my PhD work in progress titled: “My Other, My Self: Post-Binary Ontological Possibilities in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee and David Malouf”
3. In a BBC interview I listened to a couple of years ago Achebe emphasised the democratic nature of storytelling pointing out that even a person who has a stammer has a story and must tell that story herself or himself; that it would be wrong to try and complete sentences for her or him during his stammering because chances are when she or he comes to himself she or he may contradict you and say, ‘No, that is not what I was going to say’.

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University of Malawi  
Chancellor College  
Department of English  
P O Box 280  
Zomba  
Malawi  
*mfuned@yahoo.co.uk*