

WOMEN'S VOICES AND ACTIONS IN ACHEBE'S LITERARY WORKS

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Abstract

The novels of Chinua Achebe have been studied from various perspectives. Not much have been written about his attention on Gender. This article has taken a close look on Chinua Achebe's feminist leaning as documented in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Specifically, the attention of this article centers on the socio-political role of women in the selected novels of the above African writer. Elsewhere, feminists have made notable break-throughs in various fields of life. Without prejudice to the very few exceptions where they have been allowed to play presiding roles in cult, women are still generally excluded from the priestly roles. Achebe on the other hand notes that this was not the situation in the pre-colonial era. In the pre-colonial era, in most African societies, women who have attained menopause were allowed to play prophetic and priestly roles. Our guiding theoretical frameworks will feature feminism and beyond feminism.

Introduction

A feminist reading of Chinua Achebe's novels demonstrates that literature is life; that there is relationship between literature and culture in these works as far as women's experiences are concerned. Literature exists only in a social milieu, as part and parcel of a given culture. One could interpret a literary work within the context of *race*, *milieu* and *moment*. *Race* refers to the human population involved; *milieu* applies to the socio-political or cultural setting while the *moment* pays attention to the epoch or era under consideration. This does not remove the fact that the most direct setting of a work of literature is its linguistic and literary tradition. Such a linguistic and literary source cannot be delineated from a concrete social, political, economic and cultural setting. In a word literature depends on the society. This is the observation made by Wellek and Warren (1956;106). One must admit that the social situation seems to determine the possibility of the realization of certain aesthetic values, but not the values themselves. In the final analysis, though literature may be an imitation of life, literature cannot replace sociology, history or politics. Where literature mirrors the society, the concepts of love, sentiment and sexuality takes uppermost position. This assertion is rooted in the fact that human society finds its source and bearing in gender relationship. Such relationship between the sexes nurtures marriage and family. Families in turn make up the society where human experiences and contributions to nature result in culture and tradition.

Culture has been predominantly dominated by the male gender. Such a domination otherwise known as patriarchy permeated literature. Chinua Achebe has in his own stylistic approach created much awareness of the female condition. His depiction of the experiences of women is realistic. He portrays the feminine experiences with fidelity and accurate documentation. He chooses realistic subjects from contemporary everyday life of the less privileged class of the society; this time the women. He has no room for falsification of truth and complicated plots. He is impersonal and objective and spared no body in his satires. By keeping the reader in suspense till the end of the plot, he succeeds in creating awareness of the oppressive condition women are in and the need for a change. This paper takes a look, inter alia at the place of women in Achebe's world. The reaction of women to certain obnoxious cultural practices are recorded and appraised.

Men's Actions and Women's Reactions in Domesticity.

Achebe tries to prove in his artistic world that matrimonial or domestic violence is sanctioned by African culture in a celebrated comedy in *Arrow of God*. Akueke one of the daughters of Ezeulu and a half sister of Obika used to come home complaining that in her matrimonial home, she was always her husband's punching bag. The next time she came again with swollen face, Obika could no longer bear it. He set out for Umuogwugwu in the company of his pugnacious friend Ofoedu for vengeance. It has been noted that men will punch their wives but protect their sisers and daughters:

No one in Ezeulu's compound knew where Obika had gone until he returned a little before noon with Ofoedu. On their heads was Akueke's husband lied to a bed, almost dead. They set him down under the Ukwa tree and dared anyone to move him. The women and the neighbours pleaded with Obika and showed him the threatening ripe fruit on the tree, as big as water pots (TAG, 11).

Wife battering in Achebe's world does not end with regular physical beatings. Men also threaten their wives with guns. Once Okonkwo actually shot at Ekwefi and only narrowly missed his target. The Egwugwu masquerades also settled another case of wife battering in *Things fall Apart*. Uzowulu was always pounding it on his wife Mgbafo even when she was bedridden:

My in-law has told you that we went to his house, beat him up and took our sister and her children away. All that is true. He told you that he came to take back her bride price and we refused to give it to him... My in-law Uzowulu is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty... (TFA 64/65)

Ousseye Diop in Aminata Sow Fall's *Le Revenant* is a male character like Okonkwo; an example of male chauvinism, brutality and savagery. His wife is more of a slave in her husband's home. The woman toils as cook, as farmer and earns the family's daily bread through laundry work. Yet the 'appreciation' she gets from her husband are regular beatings at the slightest provocation. His action and utterance towards his wife are always wild and aggressive as we could see from the quotation below where he shouts at his wife, slaps her and vandalizes her property:

Tout a coup on vit surgir de sa baraque le pere Ousseye qui hurlait: Ngone tu fais la sourde oreille maintenant quand je t'appelle... Et tu as repondu a tout! Mauvaise femme! Avec une fureur qui plaqua au sol tous ceux qui etaient la, Ousseye alla droit a la table, la renversa, donna un coup de pied a la – baignoire qui contenait le linge amidonne, et on vit des boudous tout blancs entasse en forme de sable noir de la cour, comme des ballons. Tante Ngone courut pour prevenir le geste de son mari, ou plutot pour limiter les degats, car le mal etait deja fait. Mais elle recut une gifle eclatante qui la fit se plier en deux et qui fit intervenir les voisins. (LR 74-76)

The inability of men to cope with their ungovernable temper in marriage is a regular phenomenon in many homes. In Africa such ungovernable temper leads to wife-battering. During such fights the children either take sides or remain silent though with sadness and grief in their hearts. Most children however, usually stand in solidarity with their mother. They grow up getting more attached to their mothers while distancing themselves from their fathers. Some even hate their fathers outrightly. This does not rule out the fact that some women, once they have settled down in their matrimonial homes, show their real ugly character. The birth of a male child aggravates this scenario. They indoctrinate their children and demonize their husbands.

Women's Responses in the Home

Women's response and reactions were graphically detailed as well in Achebe's fictional world. Hence juxtaposed against male violence in Achebe's world is female peacefulness, forbearance and solidarity. Nwoye's mother had to tell lie in *Things Fall Apart* so as to appease her husband and protect her co-wife Ojiugo from Okonkwo's wrath during the week of peace:

Okonkwo knew she was not speaking the truth, ... and when she returned he beat her very heavily... his first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week (TFA 21)

This female solidarity and fellow feeling inspite of the intrigues and jealousies that mark women relationship in polygamous homes was noticeable when Okonkwo battered Ekwefi.

Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. Neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, "it is enough Okonkwo" pleaded from a reasonable distance (TFA 27).

Next unlike women in *Things Fall Apart* who lived in harmony and peace, women in *Arrow of God* tend to prove that polygamy is an obnoxious practice. One could see Okonkwo's wives running in alarm to plead on behalf of a maltreated co-wife. Nwoye's mother would call out on Ezinma to get her a charcoal of fire. Ekwefi in turn would assist in picking the charcoal of fire and handing it over to Ezinma for onward delivery to Nwoye's mother. The little girl, on arrival does not just drop the charcoal of fire. She would ask to make the fire for Nwoye's mother. Women in polygamous homes, taking Ezeulu's family for example lack fellow feeling and a sense of unity and harmony: when for instance Ibe, Akueke's husband was to come and negotiate her return to her matrimonial home, the request made by Ezeulu to Matefi for Cassava food preparation fell on deaf ears. Ezeulu captures the reason:

I have noticed that you will not do anything happily unless it is for yourself or your children (AOG 62)

Women in Social Roles

Achebe has also not always presented women as the innocent ones who are always taking the blows from the men. Culturally speaking women have records of landmarks in Achebe's world. Women excel in Fashion and house beautification. They are readily available during festivities and religious celebrations to play their artistic, theatrical fashion and artcraft roles:

The festival was now only three days away. Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had then drawn patterns on them in white, yellow and dark green. They then set about painting themselves with Camwood, and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and on their backs. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns (TFA 27).

Culturally we observe that apart from singing, folktales and dancing, women were generally excluded from most traditional sports in the fictive world of Achebe. Wrestling for instance was a strong feature of sports in Achebe's world. In every instance, women were perfectly segregated against in that area. They were merely spectators, except where women evolved their own version of sports and leisure. Even in drumming, which is an art as well as a sport, those who perform such roles

come by it through hereditary. They are seen as people possessed by the spirits of the drum. (TFA 33). Women are seen as those who narrate the stories after the men have ended the battle. In this way, after Okafo had won the wrestling match against Ikezue, women took up the chorusing.

Who will wrestle for our village Okafo will wrestle for our village. Has he thrown a hundred men? He has thrown four hundred men. Has he thrown a hundred cats? He has thrown four hundred cats. Then send him word: to fight for us: (TFA 36)

Even in folk stories and epic there is equally segregation between masculine stories and feminine stories. Men narrate masculine stories and exploits to their men children. Such stories which revolve around warfare, bloodshed, cavalry, cult and culture are masculine special preserve. Women should be contented with feminine narratives and sing-songs like the ones concerning the tortoise and his cunning ways as well as the birds and animals. In short women and children's field are the equivalent of today's cartoon network.

In manners and courtesies, women when offered a drink squat to take it. She holds out her hand to be shaken. She should not climb a tree. She watches while her twins are killed. She is beauty to be admired especially during celebrations and marriage rites. She is also inherited the way assets are inherited (TFA 13). We could take an example from Obierika's daughter's marriage rite:

Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe... (TFA 41).

The girl has to be sixteen years or below. If not she would be greeted with the type of sarcastic proverb that welcomed Comfort who was twenty six years old and had gone with her fiance to his village for the first time. One of his fiance's aunts said to her hearing:

If Ogiri (traditional maggi or soup spice) was such a valuable condiment no one would leave it lying around for rats to stumble upon and dig into! (AOTS 89).

Like a commodity for sale the bride has to be in her best on the day the suitor or bridegroom is coming:

She (Akueke) wore a coiffure which was done up into a crest in the middle of the head. Cam wood was rubbed lightly into her skin, and all over her body were black patterns drawn with uli. She wore a black necklace which hung down in three coils just above her full, succulent breasts. On her arms were red and yellow bangles, and on her waist four or five rows of jigida or waist-beads. (TFA 51).

The test of virginity as we have earlier mentioned is part and parcel of marriage customs and rites in most African societies. The test is only for women not

for men just as most Ogbanije children are girls (TFA 54) Achebe mirrored this in *Arrow of God*. Alioum Fantoure in *Le Cercle des Tropiques* corroborated this in his fictive world of Guinea:

Un jour le mariage eut lieu... J' assistai aux ceremonies. A la tombee de le nuit, le couple se retira... A l' aube deux vieilles femmes montrèrent aux invites un pagne blanc tache. La tache de la virginite consommee de Mayalan... (LCDT. 80)

Achebe did not make his world a standard for all fictive worlds of Africa. He recognized the exigencies of places and times, which call for contextualized worldviews and experiences. In Abame and Aninta; titled men were said to be climbing trees and pounding foofoo for their wives. There too they “*haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market*”. In Umunso they neither bargain nor give out their daughters free:

The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop” (TFA 51).

There were equally pointers to matriarchy as Okonkwo would say: ‘*I have even heard that in some tribes a man’s children belong to his wife and her family*’. Other issues that come up now and then in feminist circles like the symbolism of a man lying on top of the woman in traditional African society was seen as culturally right. A woman lying on top of the man “*when they are making children*” would be seen as a taboo. The man is seen as the superior gender. He heads the family. He should be the one to make the overtures and during sex he should be on top. Feminists are today questioning such positions in African culture.

Women also discriminate against men in some cultural celebrations. In the festivity of Uri, when the in-laws paid the bulk of the dowry women are virtually in charge:

Everybody has been invited - men, women, and children. but it was really a woman’s ceremony and the central figure were the bride and her mother (TFA 77)

Docile however as women in Achebe’s pre-colonial and early colonial world might have been, traces of objection, one must note began much earlier. Ekwefi was earlier married to Anene but she decided one day to call it quit on her own and ran to Okonkwo who at once went to bed with her:

She had married Anene because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene, she ran away to Okonkwo. It had been early in the morning... she was going to the stream to fetch water... she went in and knocked at his door and he came out. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth (TFA 76).

Other women are notorious for one vice or the other but they go scot-free. By so doing women could be said to have equally bullied and maltreated men. In *Things Fall Apart* Nwayieke was a very good example of such women. Ugoye was her counterpart in *Arrow of God* (64). She was conspicuously notorious for late cooking. Such women are usually through with their catering service when every member of their family had gone to bed. They mirror women in reality in most African societies who have no timetable for meals in their homes:

The world was silent except for the shrill cry of insects, which was part of the night, and the sound of wooden mortar and pestle as Nwayieke pounded her fofofo. Nwayieke lived four compounds away, and she was notorious for her late cooking. Every woman in the neighbourhood knew the sound of Nwayike's mortar and pestle. It was also part of the night (TFA 67)

Prostitution

Achebe also tried to satirize ultra-feminist ideals which he regarded as foreign habits that came with colonialism. The first of these habits is prostitution. The idea is that the whites imported these foreign practices which were prevalent in Europe. Captain, Winterbottom for instance had family crises. While in the Camerouns fighting the Germans during the second world war, his wife eloped with a lover. (AOG 103). Winterbottom then imported extra-marital relationship and prostitution to the colony:

The real trouble with Winterbottom', said Wright after deep thought", is that he is too serious to sleep with native women"... How widespread was the practice of white men sleeping with native women. (AOG 108)

The African culture that instilled discipline in both man and woman has been conquered by the invading European civilization and the old order has crumbled. The female gender in particular appears to have received the greatest blow.

Political involvement of Women

In Achebe's fictive world the political system that the white-men met in most towns in Igboland was a dual sex political administrative system. The council of elders known otherwise as *Ndichie* and the council of married daughters or women leaders called *Umuada* wields administrative power. In the council of elders the primacy of power goes to the most elderly person. He convenes the gatherings and steers the course of the resolution. Power is not centralized in one particular person or group of persons. Clear signals of decentralization of power could be discerned in the Age-grades, the priests and priestesses, the *Umuada* and the judiciary (the Masquerade group) who in *Arrow of God* was referred to as the *Egwugwu*:

- Council of elders

This body is the highest decision – making organ in the village:

The meeting took place under the timeless Ogbu tree on whose mesh of exposed roots generations of Unmaro elders had sat to take weighty decisions (AOG 141).

- **Republican leadership**

The council of elders recognizes titled men and women whose opinion matter as far as the organization of the village is concerned . There is therefore no absolute power in one person or group of persons :

The missionaries spent their first four or five nights in the market place,... they asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them that there was no king. We have men of high title and the chief priests and the elders: they said... They asked for a plot of land. (TFA 105).

- **Women in Leadership**

Generally women organize themselves at their own levels. Many a time their collective and unanimous decisions are taken into consideration in the village administration:

It is 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... That is why we say mother is supreme – Nneka” (TFA 94).

- **The Judiciary**

The masked spirits or the Egwugwu serve as the court:

Evil forest began to speak and all the while he spoke everyone was silent. The eight other egwugwu were as still as statues:

We have heard both sides of the case, said Evil forst. Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute TFA 66.

- **Daughters of the Family (Umuada)**

The married daughters of the clan do meet regularly to resolve difficult issues affecting the clan:

The daughters of the family were all there, some of them having come a long way from their homes in distant villages. Uchendu's eldest daughter had come from Obodo, nearly half a days journey away... it was a full gathering of Umuada, (TFA 93).

Women leadership roles in the dual sex administrative system come up as a pressure group. Women have leaders and spokespersons who articulate women's

viewpoints and fight for their interests. Women leadership, both at the level of daughters of the family (Umuada) and at that of the married women in the kindred (otu ndi nne) play complementary roles with their male counterparts. Primacy of place goes of course to the male administrative machinery. Traditional society gives women the role of intervening only when everything else had failed (AOTS 71). The 1929 women's war (Aba women's riot) in Eastern Nigeria when women mobilized themselves as a last resort to confront the oppressive British colonialists, and the courageous efforts of the women in Thies who succeeded where the men have failed in Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960) were notable examples:

*Les negociations de Thies ont echoue;
Les imams et les pretres organisent une campagne de demoralization,
et la situation des cheminots grevistes est critique... Les femmes de
Thies sous l'impulsion de penda decident une marche sur Dakar. La
troupe tire²⁵*

Chinua Achebe captures the above scenario in *Anthills of the Savannah* through his character of Beatrice:

*... Like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears
abandoned by their defeated men folk. 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! (AOTS 91-92).*

Some women demolished the segregations that were put in place by the men folk through their extra-ordinary strength of will, background, sorcery and cult and by so doing attained great socio-political heights that towered above even those of the male Lords of the society. Such women in Achebe's world as Chielo (*Things Fall Apart*), and Chika (*Things Fall Apart*), (priestesses and prophetesses).

In terms of organization, both private and public, women are usually exceptional managers and very authoritarian in virtually all African societies. Chinua Achebe underscores this point very pungently. The celebration of Obierika's daughter's Uri, that is:

*the day on which her suitor (having already paid the greater part of
her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only to her parents and
immediate relatives but to the wide and extention group of Kinsmen
called umunna. Everybody had been invited – men, women, and
children. But it was really a women's ceremony and the central figures
were the bride and her mother (TFA 77).*

On such days the association of married women in the village demonstrates her level of public administration both in the catering and in the foolproof division of labour and women organization and managerial skill. Tasks and

foodstuffs are allotted to each woman and there was no negligence or absenteeism without apologies. The attendant tasks and the contribution of foodstuff to Obierika's wife for the feeding of the entire village and the hosting of the numerous guests had earlier been distributed and allotted out to the women. Achebe uses his skills in literary manœuvre to show that women are the better managers in the society:

Okonkw's family was astir like any other family in the neighbourhood, Nwoye's mother and Okonkwo's youngest wife were ready to set out for Obierika's compound with all their children. Nwoye's mother carried a basket of Cocoyams, a cake of salt and smoked fish which she would present to Obierika's wife. Okonkwo's youngest wife Ojiugo, also had a basket of plantains and Cocoyams and a small pot of palm-oil. The children carried pots of water. (TFA 77).

Ekwefi and Chielo the priestess who had made the great marathon race on the eve had to be excused for coming late. That does not of course exculpate her from contributing her foodstuff:

Ekwefi asked Nwoye's mother and Ojingo to explain to Obierika's wife that she would be late. She had got ready her basket of cocoyams and fish, but she must wait for Ezinma to wake (TFA 78).

Such a level of public administration may appear simple to us in our sophisticated society today. How do we explain the idea of late coming and time consciousness to a people who did not use watch and clock? One can draw analogies from the indirect inuendos which are cast against these big men who could not even apologise for their late-coming. In his narrative realism he tells his story straight away without equivocations and romances. An indepth reading of his work will reveal the unseen comparison one could make between the idea of *African Time* and the idea of Africa being a continent where nothing works. Women in Achebe's world show that Africans could be time conscious and where one cannot unavoidably come on time, one should offer apologies. Women in the fictive world of African writers are proving that Nigeria, nay Africa is a place where things can work effectively. Such sense of management goes to the area of leisure and sports. Women maintain absolute secrecy and esprit du Corps in the women musical societies, wrestling and dancing groups:

The women of Iguedo did not meet in their secret enclosure to learn a new dance to be displayed later to the village (TFA 139)

Elsewhere villages like Umuagu in *Arrow of God* had their own women wrestling festivities. The *Mgba Agbogho* wrestling of Maidens as they are called is an annual feast which had its place in the clans. (AOG 193).

Literary expressions of femalecentric political participation in the African novels lend weight to the contention of women writers like Flora Nwapa that politically speaking there was a woman's world 'Uwa Umunwanyi'. Portraiture of women as nonentities in pre-colonial political organisation of African societies are thereby debunked. In spite of these obvious reasons for a change of the status quo, the colonialist still went on and colluded with the menfolk to defeminize the socio-political sphere of the society and to offer women mere tokens.

Economic Contribution of Women

Though women have been presented in most patriarchal writings as dependents, new insights gathered from female writings have corrected this notion. Women have actually contributed immensely in the economic well-being of their homes and by implication of their nations. Uchendu, (1995:23,33) has this to say about Ibo women:

Igbo women were known for their economic independence during the pre-colonial era.

The economic and political roles of the traditional Nigerian woman were considered very important because she shared the family expenses with her husband and in some families, unlike her European counterparts, was the family's bread winner.

The economic affairs in the literary creation of most African writers in the pre-colonial and early colonial period was mostly at the subsistence level. The technology propelling the economy was still simple and local compared to our present day standards. Commercial enterprise was in vogue then, but the proceeds were mostly geared towards the sustenance of domestic and immediate kindred budgets. Each village had its own market and market days and items of clothings and fashion, house-hold needs, crafts, farm tools, house furniture and construction, food and cult were generally marketed. The means of exchange was the cowries shells. Instances existed where there was trade by barter. Unlike in our modern day society, where high-scale purchases and contractor jobs are used, self-help projects and communal efforts sustained almost all domestic and village needs. Most jobs are carried out without payment; at most the recipient of such services provides palmwine drinks and food. Most other time mutual help and services sustained people's needs. In this type of subsistent economy, it was observed that women distinguished themselves in a very high scale. They competed favourably with the men and in most other cases complemented their efforts.

In *Arrow of God*, Achebe paid glowing tribute to women's economic enterprise when he described the scene that Akukalia and his co-emissaries observed on their journey to Okperi:

The day was Eke, and before long Akukalia and his companions began to pass women from all the neighbouring villages on their way to the famous Eke Okperi market. They were mostly women from Elumelu and Abame who made the best pots in all the surrounding country. Everyone carried a towering load of five or six or even more big water pots held together with a net of ropes on a long basket, and seemed in the half light like a spirit with a fantastic head (AOG 19).

Achebe's traditional women excelled so much in promoting the economy of their towns that each village would name the medicine that sustained their market's prosperity after a woman:

At first Eke was a very small market. Other markets in the neighbourhood were drawing it dry. Then one day the men of Okperi made a powerful deity and placed and their market in its care. From that day Eke grew and grew until it became the biggest market in these parts. This deity which is called Nwanyieke is an old woman... (AOG 19)

Similarly in *Things Fall Apart* the portent which sustains the town is called Agadi Nwanyi or old woman (TFA 8). Virtually all the towns that had great markets had women as the repository of the spiritual force that sustained the market's wealth:

Every market-day, before the first cock-crow this medicine stands on the market-ground in the shape of an old woman with a fan. With this magic fan she beckons to the market of all the neighbouring clans... 'And so everybody comes'. (TFA 79)

In the area of agriculture, Okonkwo's women were a force to be reckoned with. Infact men were said to marry many wives so as to get hands to tend their farms:

Different people have different reasons for marrying... some want a woman to help on the farms (AOG 63)

It was not surprising then that Okonkwo who all his life dreamt how to be ever great and prosperous married three wives. Even though yam was seen as the king of crops and as such a male crop, the planting process was carried out by men and women:

Some days, when the land had been moistened by two or three heavy rains, Okonkwo and his family went to the farm with baskets of seed-yams, their hoes and matchets, and the planting began. They made single mounds of earth in straight lines all over the field and sowed the yams in them. (TFA 24)

After the planting season, it was the duty of the women to weed and maintain the farm:

As the rains became heavier, the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds ... The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late (TFA 24)

One must not rule out the planting of cassava which was the staple food of every day life. Cocoyam supplements cassava in the daily domestic menu. These areas are the economic domains of the woman in every home. In *Arrow of God* for instance, when the news came that the husband of Akueke and his people were to come to negotiate the return of their wife, Ezeulu immediately sent for his first wife. He asked her to get cassava ready for the guests (AOG 62). Women in Achebe's world were economically independent. They worked hard to enrich themselves and their families. A section of our present day women who spend their time in prodigality, gossips, intrigues and squandamania has a lot to learn from the productivity, decency and autarky of Achebe's womanists. Nneka, the wife of Amadi, the first woman convert to Christianity in *Things Fall Apart* was referred to as "a prosperous farmer" (TFA 107). With their private income they competed favourably among themselves in fashion among other areas of life.

The ceremony of purification in Umuaro in the *Arrow of God* is usually an opportunity for women to display their fashion. Women show their profundity of wealth judging from their outward appearance:

Because it was specially their day, the women wore their finest cloths and ornaments of ivory and beads according to... the strength of their own arms (AOG 66)

Then women were not very extravagant with their resources as they helped each other in a mutual show of communalism:

Ezeulu's younger wife examined her hair in a mirror held between her thighs. She could not help feeling that she did a better job on Akueke's hair than Akueke did on hers... (AOG 66).

Women have always loved fashion. During celebrations, no woman would want to be left out in the competition of good public appearance:

They were just in time to see the arrival of the five wives of Nwaka and the big stir they caused. Each of them wore not anklets but two enormous rollers of ivory reaching from the ankle almost to the knee. Their walk was perforce slow and deliberate, like the walk of an Igele Mask lifting and lowering each foot with weighty ceremony. On top of all this the women were clad in many coloured velvets. Ivory and

velvets were not new in Umuaro but never before had they been seen with such profusion from the house of one man. (AOG 68) (of TFA 27)

Achebe had underscored the autonomy and well-being of the average Igbo married woman. The husband may beat her or show his male chauvinism to her in every other thing but not in her public appearance. In fact it is acknowledged in Nigeria that the Igbo make good husbands. They may be in tatters but they make sure that their wives look cute. The average Igbo man calls his wife *Ori-aku-di-ya* (He who savours the wealth of her husband). Even though she may not be allowed to break kola-nut but she custodies kola-nut and presents it to the husband each time a guest arrives. If she has no kola-nut, then there will be none for the guest. This symbolizes that Igbo women, nay African women are the custodians and managers of their families' houses and resources. Ezeulu would always call out to his children to ask their mother to bring kola-nut:

Tell your mother that Ezeulu is greeting her. If she has any Kola-nut let her bring (AOG 110).

Chinweizu (1990:14-15) corroborates this condition of the home when he wrote that:

There are five conditions which enable women to get what they want from men; women's control of the womb, women's control of the kitchen, women's control of the cradle, the psychological immaturity of man, relative to woman, and man's tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis

The Feminist in Achebe's later Works.

However Chinua Achebe is of the view that a crop of women are emerging who are no longer conforming to traditions and customs that make them miserable and uncomfortable. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe created a heroine by name Beatrice who made a first class honours degree in English from London University. Achebe presents her as "*a perfect embodiment of my ideal woman, beautiful without being glamorous. Peaceful but very strong...* (AOTS 63). Beatrice's mother had then prayed for a baby boy since male children were preferable to female children. God however offered her a baby girl. Beatrice says: "*I did not realize until much later that my mother bore me a huge grudge because I was a girl. I was a girl – her fifth in a row though one had died - and that when I was born she had so desperately prayed for a boy to give my father*", (AOTS 87). Beatrice would always recall that her father did from time to time give her mother some regular beatings behind locked doors.

There were times I suspected that he may have flogged our poor mother... On those occasions my father always took the precaution to lock the door of their room. She would come out afterwards... wiping her eyes with one corner of her wrapper, too proud or too adult to cry

aloud like us... But it always made me want to become a sorceress that could say 'Die' to my father and he would die as in the folktale. (AOTS 86).

All these experiences helped to sharpen Beatrice's feminist nature. Hence she would term as nonsense all prevailing sexist customs such as the one which declares:

Better to marry a rascal than grow a moustache in your father's compound; better an unhappy marriage than an unhappy spinsterhood; better marry Mr wrong in this world than wait for Mr Right in heaven" (AOTS 88).

Beatrice, therefore, detested all forms of panic by women to get married early. Hence she put her career first and she never agreed to the idea that a woman needs a man for her to be complete. In spite of all these, Beatrice was no march to Comfort, a twenty six year old girl who had to throw her future spouse out of their flat. In his place, he married a northerner. Comfort's annoyance was that her spouse kept quiet at his village in the south-south when his aunt used a proverb to cast innuendos at Comfort. Her fiance's aunt had sarcastically made reference to Comfort's advanced age. As for Beatrice her posture paid off eventually:

My experience with Chris was, of course entirely different. He seemed to understand everything about me without asking a single question. In those first days, he would very often startle me with insights about little things like colours or food or behaviour, I liked or didn't like and I would ask: but how did you know?... (AOTS 89)

Beatrice and Ikem in *Anthills of the Savannah* lived and loved each other better than a brother and a sister both as students in London and as workers in Nigeria. Ikem took a lot of pains trying to be of assistance to Beatrice in her most trying moments; yet both never consummated their relationship in marriage. Ikem was selfless in all his sacrifices. Sex did not come in as the *raison d'être* of his efforts towards Beatrice and vice versa.

Men may claim that they construct houses which of course is true; but the maintenance culture falls within the purview of women, that is the maintenance of both the house and the occupants or tenants, namely the house, the men and the children as well as domestic animals, poultry and pets. Apart from woman's fertility the woman has numerous other qualities for which she ought to be appreciated as Adebayo Aduke (2000:293) would caution:

Maternity and child bearing are not the prized trophies of a marriage but experiences that are consciously desired and chosen by women. In other words the woman should be loved and appreciated for her human qualities (love, kindness) and not for her fertility

After the completion of his period in exile, for example, Okonkwo the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*, planned a great thanksgiving feast for his mother's people. Okonkwo budgeted three goats and fowls. The rest of the items were to be shared among his three wives:

Ekwefi still had some cassava left on her farm from the previous year. Neither of the other wives had. It was not that they had been lazy, but that they had many children to feed. It was therefore understood that Ekwefi would provide cassava, for the feast. Nwoye's mother and Ojiugo would provide the other things like smoked fish, palm oil and pepper for the soup. Okonkwo would take care of meat and yams. (TFA 116).

The above division of labour sums up the domestic efforts of the mother in Achebe's fictive world. The traditional economic role of women in most countries of Africa has continued even in our day where whole sectors of the economy, such as internal trade, agriculture, agro-business and health care are controlled by women who constitute more than half of African's population. (Ama Ata, 1998:39). From the foregoing we have observed that male writers purposely refused to highlight women's roles and experiences both in literature and in documentary. Aminata Sow Fall and other anglophone women writers came on stage and made the difference.

Conclusion

Achebe's name may not be approved for inclusion in the feminist literary canon, but a closer reading of Achebe's writings proves that Achebe has done far more to uplift the feminine condition than most acclaimed feminist writers. Feminist literature in its widest sense means writings by women and women's sympathizers with women's orientations. Chinua Achebe in his use of language, style and characterization champions the experiences of women. By so doing he qualifies as women's sympathizer. From the foregoing it is concluded that in Achebe's fictive world women characters play indispensable roles. These roles highlight both positive and negative contributions of women in the society. Achebe has clearly noted that women have three leanings: the traditional, the liberal and the radical.

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