

“WO”man of the People: Gender Roles, Nationhood, and National Identity in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

Gendered assumptions of nationalism have been an integral part of liberation and post-liberation theory and fiction resulting in the construction of disempowered national identities for women in the modern African states. The narratives of idealization and mythologizing sketch women in the developing literary canvas as symbolic or biological figures who had no active social or political roles or voices. This paper focuses on how gender roles in national identity and nation-building have evolved in the works of the major male African writer Chinua Achebe. It examines the narratives that have reinforced or challenged Achebe with particular focus on how the portrayal of women in his final novel stands him as a progressive in terms of a new vision of the role and space of women in modern Africa.

Keywords: *gender roles, patriarchal ideology, liberation and post-liberation theory, national identity, mythologizing*

Until fairly recently, most literature on African nationalism has generally been gender-blind. The rhetoric of liberation always appears to have been emphatically a rhetoric of unity and equality, especially for all who partook in the struggle for national liberation. However, the undeniable fact is that the concept of nation has ultimately been assumed and represented, both historically and globally, as the property of men. The obvious reason is perhaps that the “nation” itself has always been gendered as a feminized entity, and, as in the case of all other feminized entities, the claimants to ownership and control are men. These gendered assumptions of nationalism have been an integral part of liberation and post-liberation theory and fiction resulting in the construction of disempowered national identities for women in the modern African states. The focus of this paper is on how gender roles in national identity and nation-building have evolved in the works of the major male African writer Chinua Achebe with respect to the narratives that have reinforced or challenged him.

In a purely male traditional African world-view, women are mostly relegated to passive and supportive roles of wife and bearer of children to dynamic history-shaping men. At most, women are given the role of keepers of tradition and culture. As a consequence of this patriarchal division of gender roles, in the discourses of nationhood or nationalism (whether historical narratives or fictional ones) the tendency has always been to champion the male ideals of heroism and military prowess. In the early part of the spectrum of African literature, which was predominantly a male venture, women were portrayed as mythological goddesses, mother-earth figures or prophetesses who were valued for their powers of fertility or religious sanctity. The narratives of idealization and mythologizing sketch women in the developing literary canvas as symbolic or biological figures who had no active social or political roles or voices. To be fair to the early postcolonial writers, women were indeed ascribed these roles and the most significant social power a woman held (usually women beyond child-bearing age of

no other use to men) was as priestess or prophetess. Thus those who started writing with the aim of portraying historically accurate societies ended up portraying this patriarchal world order.

Although the pre-colonial societies might well have been dominated by male dynamism, they still had a place for women. Women shared social roles and, in the case of some matrilineal tribes, a significant amount of political roles. The advent of western colonialism brought about a drastic restructuring of socio-economic and political systems, while changing the dynamics of family structures. Colonialism, with its gendered hierarchy of society and culture, escalated the process of the marginalization of women, a process that seemed to have gained further impetus in the “postcolonial” period. As Elleke Boehmer observes,

The feminization of the male colonized under empire had produced, as a kind of reflex, an aggressive masculinity ... Nationalist movements encouraged their members, who were mostly male, to assert themselves as agents of their own history, as self-fashioning and in control. Women were not so encouraged. (224)

Although during the years of the struggle for liberation and post-independence nation-building, African women stood shoulder to shoulder with men to fight for and develop their nations. Regrettably, recognition of women for their active contributions and endowment of independent political and social identities have been extremely stunted in both historical and literary narratives. This, as Cynthia Enloe like Boehmer, points out, was a reaction to colonial disempowerment leading to nationalisms that “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (44). Thus, during both colonial and postcolonial times, women were marginalized in both spheres of nationalist political activities and nationalist rhetoric.

The continued stereotypical and inadequate representation of women’s roles and voices in the national struggles and even in the new intellectual modern societies was interrogated and contested by the first wave of female creative African writings from the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. This wave includes writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Ama Ata Aidoo, and theorists such as Ogunjide-Leslie. This new wave of female narratives that portrayed African women in contestatory ways debunked the hitherto dominant male ideology by foregrounding the contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities of women’s histories. They brought into focus a new location of women within nationalist struggles. This body of African literature protested against the double subjugation of African women who might have been freed of foreign masculine imperial ideology but, even after national independence, were not granted a status above the fetters of native patriarchal ideology.

These female voices thus exposed and challenged the masculinist ways in which African women’s struggles were represented. The Nigerian female writer Flora Nwapa contended that the early works of Nigerian writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, and Wole Soyinka had all, in their earlier works, played down the powerful role of women and portrayed them negatively or in subordinate positions (528). In his first four novels, Achebe’s depiction of women is essentially traditional and stereotypical. The female characters are portrayed as wives, mothers, daughters, prophetesses or priestesses whose roles are either as self-

effacing, submissive complements to resilient and assertive males or as symbolic mother figures and custodians of tradition. The challenge thrown open by the contesting narratives of African women writers was that by delimiting women to static roles while ascribing their male counterparts the roles of so-called harbingers of change in the African landscape, male writers were guilty of nurturing, reproducing, and legitimizing those traditional African hegemonies, even if unconsciously. This new perspective seems to have forced Achebe to reevaluate the patriarchal assumptions in his writings.

By the early '70s, Achebe had progressed from his initial nationalist agenda to negate European colonial discourses and replace it with new African counter narratives that demystified the dominant mythologies of empire. His focus was now on fiction that represented the realities of post-independence populations, experimenting with new identities and redefining their roles in history, and in delineating the new intellectual culture. Achebe was now grappling with questions of how to represent and reinvent a still evolving national identity in the new African world order. He had realized that it no longer sufficed to merely seek or recover models, paradigms or signifiers from traditional African ideologies, and that valid representations of the new contemporary condition did indeed require new tropes that would transcend the old static social and gender binaries.

The premise upon which Achebe, then, had based his creative works were informed and reinforced by the contemporary and influential theories of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral. Both these theorists wrote at a juncture when the politics of national emergence and the problematics of constructing distinct African cultural and political identities had perhaps resulted in a predisposition to assume all liberation and post-liberation histories to be homogenous. Both theorists have been criticized for focusing on power struggles between colonizer-colonized, black-white, government-public, but overlooking the power struggles between men and women as insignificant and thereby keeping the gender hierarchies active.

Fanon's widely acclaimed liberation discourse in *The Wretched of the Earth* has also been widely criticized for barely alluding to women's agency and where it does, doing so from a patriarchal perspective which objectifies women by identifying them as a form of weapon in war. Fanon's description of women as hidden resources of the liberation struggle actually ends up undermining the idea of women's agency he might have intended to evoke. Marie Aimee Helie-Lucas accuses Fanon of creating a myth regarding women's actual involvement in liberation. McClintock points out the absence of women's agency in Fanon's writings. Nana Wilson-Tagoe contends,

The likelihood that men may seek to subordinate women even within the revolutionary movement is certainly not a consideration in Fanon's major text ... For Fanon, then, the possibility of a distinct history of women's agency (in terms of its sources, motivations and dynamics) is never fully theorised even though he recognises the heterogeneity of national agency and the various temporalities within which national cultures are articulated. (223)

Thus Fanon falls short of theorizing and accounting for women's role and agency in the new historical terrains of an independent African state.

Cabral’s theory of identity with an emphasis on culture is no less gender-insensitive than Fanon’s. Cabral endorsed the concept of a popular national cultural identity constructed from an amalgamation of positive values of different social groups derived from the experiences of national liberation. Again, the assumption of a generalized and collective history, with males as the norm, predominates. Though Cabral admits that conferring an inferior social identity to women might result in limiting this comprehensive cultural identity, he does not take up the issue as worthy of theorizing, leaving the burden of resolving gender imbalance to “the balances and solutions which society engenders to resolve conflicts” (61). Cabral seems to assume that women’s liberation and national liberation are synonymous. He seems to take for granted that in the post-independent states, patriarchy or national liberation would naturally balance out unequal relationships within the nation and its people. Thus both Fanon and Cabral, while theorizing extensively on the relationship between identity and culture, chose to do so in terms of a masculinist liberation discourse undermining the perspectives of women’s narratives. As the leading theorists of liberation, their positions and assumptions seem to ascribe theoretical validation to the patriarchal ideology of their contemporary male creative writers.

Chinua Achebe’s fifth and last novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), portraying a post-independence African state, marks his first attempts to finally accommodate his new vision of the role and space of women in his fictional narratives. In his preceding novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), which was also about the processes of building a newly independent African state, the exclusion of women in governance or other roles of power was glaring. That his next novel underscores a female character demarcates a radical turn in the perception and portrayal of women and their part in the process of nation-building. Achebe’s Beatrice may well be labelled as a “woman of her people” for the active, political, and spiritual leadership roles she takes up in her transitional post-independence society. Flora Nwapa, who had earlier protested the subordinate roles that Achebe’s female characters were given, applauded the portrayal of Beatrice, saying, “The heroine, Beatrice Nwanyibuife, is a liberated and powerful woman, leading one to surmise that she symbolizes perhaps a sudden awakening to the importance of woman-being” (528). This re-writing of a female narrative has since been widely hailed as an exemplification of “radical new thinking” (Kofi Owusu 469) and a culmination of an evolution in Achebe’s female characters (Rose Acholonu 320).

Achebe himself is quite anxious to establish the fact that the character of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* was a product of his endeavor to amend the gender inequity of his early works. In the novel, Achebe has the character point herself out to her friend Ikem Osodi, editor of a local newspaper and creative writer, that, despite his open editorial protests against all sorts of political oppression and his play on the Women’s War of 1929, he is blind to the fact that in all his political writing, “there is no clear role for women” (91). This accusation exposes a failing that is in itself a form of oppression as it promotes an exclusion of women from the political arena of governance. This indictment is in all probability one which Achebe found himself forced to address prior to writing *Anthills*, as none of his preceding novels had created a political space for women characters. Like Ikem, often perceived as the author’s representative narrator in the novel, Achebe seems to agree that his thoughts on the role of modern women in society had hitherto been “unclear and reactionary” (96).

Beatrice is educated, economically independent, politically conscious, and most significantly, an unmarried African woman who has finally overcome the subordinate roles prescribed to women by traditional culture. She has done this against a lot of odds, without the support of a man and despite the male chauvinism in her father's house which Beatrice describes as enough to last several lifetimes. She recounts how, even during her childhood, her activities such as falling off trees that she rebelliously climbed repeatedly were reprimanded by her authoritarian father who condemned her "boyish" activities with the derogatory title "female soldier," a title that was conferred with a ritual of three spans. She had been born into a world that condemned her because of her gender, being guilty of arriving as the fifth daughter of parents who wanted nothing other than a son. Along with her Christian name, Beatrice was also given the African name Nwanyibuife meaning "a female is also something," a name which she seems to have spent all her life fortifying. Her attempts to not just be "something" but be "something else" in the male world are clear from her father repeatedly having to coerce her to act like a female and "sit like a female!" (87). That she has finally managed to find a niche to sit with authority in the all male world of the government as an official in the Ministry of Finance reveals the extent of her determination and moral fortitude.

Most importantly, Beatrice articulates a female voice that counters traditional male estimation that African women were incapable of surviving in society without male patronage. She asserts defiantly, "That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit" (88). However, Achebe is careful and conscious to not cast Beatrice as a mimic of western feminists by having her reject outright the notion that her resolve for an independent political identity and a career have anything to do with the Women's Lib that she came across during her stay in the West. This also fortifies her identity as a self-assured African woman who has not only transcended the local masculine political status quo but is critically opposed to aping the European models of female identity. One might rightly remain critical regarding the nature of change in the status quo that Beatrice represents as being more of an individual success story than a fundamental structural rupture. However, the story also reveals an awareness that progressive African women are quite capable of independently engaging in critical activities to demand changes and empower themselves without looking to the west for guidance. Elda Hungwe and Chipo Hungwe contend that,

Through Beatrice, Achebe strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women especially since the social conditions which have kept women down in the past era are now largely absent ... Achebe's newly envisioned female roles are to be expanded, articulated and secured by women themselves, and the modern African woman is doing just that. (3)

Beatrice's crusade is against the gender-based cultural backwardness of Nigerian society which has lingered from the traditional to the modern era and is evident even in the attitudes of progressive Nigerian intellectual males like Ikem, Chris, and Sam, who continue to assume male power as the norm. Beatrice's struggles to empower herself are explicitly articulated with Ikem and implicit in her dealings with Chris and Sam. She objects fiercely when she feels that Chris is positioning her role in his life only on a physical level instead of respecting her as

an intellectual and equal partner. Here she contrasts with Ikem’s girlfriend Elewa with whom Ikem maintains a predominantly physical relationship. With Sam, a friend of her youth and now the President of the country, and thus her boss, Beatrice also wrangles to get the authority and respect that her status merits. She resents his sexist remarks and patronizing attempts to showcase her for cosmetic purposes in his government. Most importantly, she dares to challenge his authority by pointing out that his fetish for white western women makes him debase himself by humoring a common American female journalist who breaks all protocol by acting indecorously with a President and his top staff. Beatrice not only presents an astute political voice but her tone is almost combative when she questions Sam, “If I went to America today, to Washington DC, would I, could I, walk into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of CIA?” (81).

Through the portrayal of Beatrice, Achebe calls attention to a systematic gender domination within the metropolis. Despite having achieved her status based on her education (the only person, male or female, in government service, with a first class honors degree in English from the University of London) and professional aptitude, Beatrice reveals a sense of being perceived and censured as an imposter in a male arena. As a result, she finds herself a target of many, including male colleagues, who affront her authority which they mock as “bottom power,” and journalists, who in the hope of winning favors from new military rulers, represent her as a “latter-day Madame Pompadour who manipulated generals and patronized writers” (84). She is troubled when she is accusingly labelled as ambitious, a negative quality for a woman, suggesting that ambition is perceived only as a masculine quality.

Interestingly, when Ikem reads Beatrice’s short fiction pieces, he also seems to be taken aback by what he labels as their “muscular” and “masculine” quality, which suggests that in her creative work too, Beatrice exhibits power and dynamism. Even Chris recognizes Beatrice’s potential to write powerfully, telling her, “I don’t know why you still haven’t written a play. You would knock Ikem into a cocked hat” (116). What Achebe is clearly trying to expose is a mindset that has not overcome the traditional cultural construct and binaries of feminine and masculine qualities and capabilities. This mindset is symptomatic of a collective negation of women in power-holding roles such as active leaders or intellectual writers. It leads to a pattern of leaving women who have actively contributed to the process of nationhood as unacknowledged or omitted and ensuring the discouragement of other potentially “ambitious” women from following suit. Another point of interest is that by portraying Beatrice as an artist capable of producing powerful works of imagination, Achebe seems to empower Beatrice further through his belief that art has the potential to reinvent identity and transform reality. In his collection of essays, *Hopes and Impediments*, Achebe points out, “art is man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on experience through his imagination” (95-96). Ironically, this gendered formulation can also be applied to a woman’s (Beatrice) constant creative efforts to create for herself a different order of reality from that which is given to her.

Through Beatrice, Achebe might attempt to valorize the status and role of women in the new nation, but he is now conscious to neither idealize them nor presume to speak on their behalf. Achebe realizes that women are capable of involving themselves directly in the struggle to

restructure society and point out where inequities linger. In *Anthills*, Ikem voices this awareness when he tells Beatrice,

I can't tell you what the new role for women will be. I don't know. I should never have presumed to know. You have to tell us. We never asked you before. And perhaps because you've never been asked you may not have thought about it; you may not have the answer handy. But in that case everybody had better know who is now holding up the action. (98)

This is undoubtedly an open declaration of the need to accommodate and represent women's agency in the new nation. *Anthills* affirms that this representation must be undertaken by women themselves.

When Beatrice finally sits to narrate her present life, she finds she cannot begin until she puts into perspective her past history and experiences. She is caught up in a tumult of emotions as she takes on the challenge of bringing together what she terms as the "many broken pieces" of her "tragic history" (82). The desperation with which she takes up the task suggests that it is a restorative process that will rid her of an internalized sense of inferiority. She vacillates between the "undiminished elation" of finally starting and the "audacity of rushing in where angels would fear to tread" (83). She self-effacingly says, "I didn't set out to write my autobiography and I don't want to do so. Who am I that I should inflict my story on the world?" (87). Yet Beatrice also elucidates the necessity for women to reassess and represent themselves or otherwise accept misrepresentation, declaring, "[it is] this truly unjust presentation that's forcing me to expose my life on these pages to see if perhaps there are aspects of me I had successfully concealed even from myself" (84). This process demonstrates what Elleke Boehmer points out to be a replication of what the first generation of male nationalists went through "for a woman to tell her own story was to call into being an image of autonomous selfhood" (225). By interrogating herself as subject as well as confronting the ideologies that define and limit her, she seeks not only to articulate this alternate discourse of the African experience but also to legitimize it.

Achebe's portrayal of Beatrice is complex and multifaceted. He seeks to empower her not only on the level of a female character, but on various other levels – creative (as a creative writer), symbolic, mythological, and narrative (as a narrator). Beatrice is one of the three first person narrators in the novel along with Ikem and Chris, and an omniscient narrator. Chris and Ikem dominate the first five chapters as they narrate the stories of their active struggles against an authority that threatens their independence. Beatrice protests their masculinist and exclusionist attitude to the historical narrative, saying, "Well, 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 ..." (66). Through Beatrice, Achebe rightly admits the pitfalls of the male-centered rhetoric. Boehmer remarks, "The kinds of narrative chosen by writers at the time of independence reflected this male-centered vision of national destiny: the quest tale, often autobiographical, featuring an individualistic hero who embodies the process ... the nostalgic reminiscence in which a mother-figure symbolizes the integrity of the past" (225).

However, when she starts her narrative in the sixth chapter, Beatrice seems to act more as a commentator on the actions of the three male characters Sam, Chris, and Ikem, and is both apologetic and defensive when narrating her life story. She appears as being less in control in defining her identity and role in her country than the men and is even characterized in their terms, as her father's "deplorable" soldier daughter, as Chris's "quiet demure damsel," and as Ikem's visionary "village priestess" (105). However, the story traces Beatrice moving on from "barely knowing who she was" and feeling alienated from the "traditions and legends of her people" (105), reeling confusedly in a tumult of emotions, "[i]ndignation, humiliation, outrage, sorrow, pity, anger, vindictiveness" (107) at Sam's treatment of her like a "disgraced soldier" (106) to a woman who picks up both the narrative thread and her role in the political and social sphere proactively. The truncated or fragmented and non-sequential form of her narrative gives a tentative but authentic voice to the tumult of emotions of the hitherto suppressed female voice. Beatrice's narrative voice then stands as what Edward Said calls "an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness," which counters "the unitary web of vision" embedded in dominant discourse (240).

After all the men fail in their struggles, it is Beatrice who takes up the story and continues the struggle, and at the end of the novel, she identifies herself assertively, in complete contrast to her previous passivity, as "a captain whose leadership was sharpened more and more by sensitivity to the peculiar needs of her company" (229). The "company" that she is leading is a group of multi-ethnic and multi-religious people who meet regularly in her flat to discuss social and political issues. When she, after a period of introspective silence and mourning, resumes her narrative interrogation of the world around her, the author comments significantly, "It was not that Beatrice had spoken no words at all before that day ... But in all this she had only used words that did not threaten to invade her thoughts and drag them into the profanity of the open air" (220). This period of mourning seems to represent a period of metamorphosis as well from which Beatrice emerges out of the mould of a private sphere into a public presence. The author thus seeks to empower Beatrice by moving her from a position of marginality to a more central position in terms of agency and authority as narrator. Also, the sharing of her narrative with the group that she leads functions as a platform for others seeking representation.

Beatrice rises above her initial elitist tendencies as she gradually realizes the need to not only acknowledge the vital roles that uneducated and underprivileged women play in her society but also to respect their right to have their voices heard. Her bonding with Elewa, a salesgirl, as well as Ikem's girlfriend, and her housemaid Agatha is indicative of her widening sensitivity to the need to reorient female power structures. This sisterhood that Beatrice forms facilitates a means of forging political solidarity. Beatrice embodies Achebe's vision of a new nationhood constructed on inclusiveness of gender and class. At the end of *Anthills*, Beatrice heads the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter, traditionally a male role, and, more importantly, she and the baby's mother give the baby girl a boy's name. The acceptance by the child's wise grandfather of this new status quo that concedes to woman-power and subverts a patriarchal tradition is symbolic of a new world order with a space for women. He says,

You have put the world where it should sit ... My wife here was breaking her head looking for kolanuts, for alligator pepper, for honey and for bitter-leaf ... And while she is cracking her head you people gather in this whiteman house and give the girl a boy's name ... That is how to handle this world. (227)

These are undoubtedly the defining lines for the role of women in the modern post-independence African states. The name given to the girl, Amaechina meaning "May the path never close," heralds the opening of a new road to empowerment and recognition for women, a path that her father Ikem had envisaged before his death.

The discussion on the modern identity of African women in general, and Beatrice in particular, would be incomplete if the question of cultural identity is excluded. The objective of preserving and promoting African cultural values epitomize Achebe's works. However, as discussed earlier, Achebe had realized that an authentic modern cultural identity could not be represented by simply revamping traditional mythologies with all their stereotypical denotations. Achebe's portrayal of Beatrice aims to attune her to her cultural heritage and native people and yet give her modern character cultural legitimacy. This is achieved by creating new mythologies by weaving strands from traditional Igbo mythology, a process of de-mythologizing and re-mythologizing.

Traditional mythology saw women as keepers of tradition and also maintainers of morality and humanity in times of crisis. Beatrice is repeatedly referred to as a "village priestess" by Ikem (105), "Cherubim and Seraphim prophetess" and "priestess" by Chris (114, 115) and she even refers to herself as feeling like "Chielo," a character in Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart*, who functioned as a visionary prophetess of the hills and caves (114). The omniscient narrative parallels Beatrice with the goddess Idemili who, according to legend, was sent to oversee morality, moderate male desire for authority, and warn or punish over-reachers. Thus Achebe reconnects Beatrice with her African heritage and further empowers her as a judicious voice of moderation in a world of extremes. Her Christian name Beatrice also seems to have been chosen intentionally by Achebe. It carries symbolic import as it may well allude to Dante's Beatrice in *Divine Comedy*, who acts as a guide and source of strength to the lost Virgil in "Inferno." Both Dante's Beatrice and Achebe's Beatrice embody a source of redemption in a threatened world order. Also, on the symbolic level, Beatrice represents the proverbial anthill, referred to in the title of the novel that survives to narrate the tale of the drought (symbolizing a period of barren exclusionist politics). Achebe's Beatrice fractures masculine paradigms of power and paves the way for a new world order structured on evenly balanced gender identities and roles.

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