WOMEN IN ACHEBE'S WORLD

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When literary activities marking the sixtieth birthday of Chinua Achebe reached fever-pitch in 1990, the greatest accolade given him was summed up in one metaphor: the eagle on the iroko. Now, anybody familiar with the African landscape knows that the iroko is the tallest, strongest tree in the forest and that the eagle is, of course, the king of the birds. It is not an easy feat to scale the tree; that is why the Igbo proverb insists: "One does not climb the iroko twice." Having succeeded in climbing the iroko, the climber should appropriate all that he finds there: he may not be able to do so again. The eagle, however, can both scale and soar above the tree over and over.

In this metaphor the iroko then represents the field of African literature; the eagle, Chinua Achebe. Achebe has, of course, literally climbed and soared above the iroko several times. More than those of any other African writer, his writings have helped to develop what is known as African literature today. And the single book which has helped him to launch his "revolution" is the slim, classic volume called Things Fall Apart (1958). Having been the first, so to speak, to scale the top of the iroko, this eagle Achebe, and other male eaglets after him, arguably have appropriated all that they have found there.

This paper will explore what is left for female eagles. The focus of my study includes: 1) Achebe's portraiture of women in his fictional universe, the existing sociocultural situation of the period he is depicting, and the factors in it that condition male attitudes towards women; 2) the consequences of the absence of a moderating female principle in his fictions; 3) Achebe's progressively changing attitude towards women's roles; and 4) feminist prospects for African women. In the context of this study, the Igbo people whom Achebe describes will represent the rest of Nigeria -- and a great many of the nations of Africa.

Sociocultural Background

Were Nigeria and Africa oppressively masculinist? The answer is, "Yes." Ghana was known to have some matrilineal societies, such as the Akans; but Nigeria's traditional culture, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, had been masculine-based even before the advent of the white man. The source, nature, and extent of female subordination and oppression have constituted a vexed problem in African literary debates. Writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana and the late Flora Nwapa of Nigeria have insisted that the image of the helpless, dependent, unproductive African woman was one ushered in by European imperialists whose women lived that way. On the other hand, the Nigerian-born, expatriate writer Buchi Emecheta, along with other critics, maintains that African women were traditionally subordinated to sexist cultural mores. I ally myself to the latter camp. I believe that, in creating a masculine-based society, Achebe was merely putting literature to mimetic use, reflecting existing traditional mores. Colonial rule merely aggravated the situation by introducing a lopsided system in which African men received a well-rounded education while, like their European counterparts before the mid-nineteenth century, African women received only utilitarian, cosmetic skills in Domestic Science Centers -- the kinds of skills that only could prepare them to be useful helpmates of educated, premier nationalists and professionals such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first President, and the late Obafemi Awolowo, the Yoruba tribalist leader. Things Fall Apart is significant because it began the vogue of African novels of cultural contact and conflict. It has been translated into over twenty major world languages. Commensurate with its popularity, images of women receive attention. In a style that is expository rather than prescriptive,
Achebe's novel mirrors the sociocultural organization existing in the Africa of the era he describes. Like Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Mae Crawford (when married to Jody Starks), Achebe's women are voiceless. But where even Janie is highly visible, his women are virtually inconsequential.

In Of Woman Born (1977), Adrienne Rich unwittingly captures all the nuances of the African traditional social milieu when she describes patriarchy as:

the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure -- or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor -- men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male. (57-58).

The world in Things Fall Apart is one in which patriarchy intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence. It is an androcentric world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. In domestic terms, women are quantified as part of men's acquisitions. As wives, women come in multiple numbers, sandwiched between yam barns and titles. These three -- wives, yam barns, social titles -- are the highest accolades for the successful farmer, warrior, and man of worth. These determine a man's social status, as illustrated by Nwakibie who has three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children, and the highest but one title which a man can take in the clan (21).

The society that Achebe is describing (1850-1900) is an agrarian one in which the crop -- the yam -- is synonymous with virility. Achebe explains that this all-important crop [stands] for manliness, and he who [can] feed his family on yams from one harvest to another [is] a very great man indeed . . . . Yam, the king of crops, [is] a very exacting king (34-35). Consequently, to produce an abundant harvest, the traditional farmer needs a good workforce. Women constitute (and still do) the core of the rural workforce -- farming, tending animals, nurturing children, among other activities. To echo the Nigerian critic Juliet Okonkwo, Achebe's cultural universe is one in which women [are] to be seen not heard, coming and going, with mounds of foofoo, pots of water, market baskets, fetching kola, being scolded and beaten before they disappear behind the huts of their compound (36). It would not be out of place to ally the existence of such women to that of other diasporic black women described by Zora Neale Hurston's metaphor "mule[s] uh de world" (14). Indeed, Zora s Janie is robbed of her voice by her own husband Jody, who, like Okonkwo, chauvinistically believes that women's place is in the home (41), lumps together women and chillun and chickens and cows (67), and wants to be a big voice" (27) in the affairs of the community.

A similar near-invisiblity of women in Things Fall Apart is acknowledged by the omniscient narrator. Describing a communal ceremony, he confesses, "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (85). For centuries, African women languished on the fringe of their universe -- neglected, exploited, degenerated, and indeed made to feel like outsiders. They were not invited to stay when men were engaged in any discussion; they were not included in councils of war; they did not form part of the masquerades representing the judiciary and ancestral spirits.

Achebe's sexist attitude is unabashed and without apology. Unoka, Okonkwo's father, is considered an untitled man, connoting femininity (20). Coco-yam, of smaller size and lesser value than other yams, is regarded as female. Osugo has taken no title; and so, in a gathering of his peers, Okonkwo unkindly tells him, "This meeting is for men" (28). Guilt-ridden after murdering Ikemefuna, his surrogate son, Okonkwo sternly reprimands himself not to "become like a shivering old woman" (72) -- this he considers the worst insult. Fleeing after the murder, Okonkwo has no other refuge than his mother's town, which, of course, has to be called Mbanta -- "small town" -- which I read as being opposed in Okonkwo's thinking to the rugged, wild, violent, strong, masculine connotations of his Umuofia (meaning "children of the forest"). Such excessive emphases on virility, sex-role
stereotyping, gender discrimination, and violence create an imbalance, a resultant denigration of the female principle.

Such denigration brings Okonkwo to ruin just as much as it presages the demise of his society's way of life. Okonkwo largely embodies "all the virtues and some of the excesses of this society . . . . [for] around [him are] heard the rhythmic beats of Umuofia's heart" (Awoonor 253). One gets the impression of a strangle hold on individuals: especially on the weak; the untitled, considered as efulefu or "worthless"; and the outcast, embittered mothers of twins. Even designed to break the weak and the women are the welcoming arms of Christianity -- an alien religion which steals quietly into the clan, gathering adherents from those oppressed by Umuofia's rigid insistence on allegiance to gods, customs, and laws.

The Absence of a Moderating Female Principle

Things Fall Apart is redolent of violent conflicts occasioned by the utter lack of a moderating female influence. One example of this absence can be found in Achebe's employment of the folktale narrating the conflict between Earth, representing fertility or the female principle, and Sky, representing the male principle. Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan argue that "the [folktale s] initial quarrel between Earth and Sky represents the struggle between masculine and female powers and principles" (127). They assert that Okonkwo, who occasionally but reluctantly yields his tender emotions most often expressed perversely towards Ikemefuna and Nwoye, is a paradigm for Sky who withholds rain but releases it reluctantly and perversely, since rain [falls] as it [has] never fallen before, preventing vulture, who represents the female principle, from returning to deliver his message, just as Nwoye, with his effeminate nature, [does] not return to Okonkwo's compound. (20-21)

In the manner of the tragic hero, Okonkwo's consequent despair and fall represent the despair and break-up of the Igbo clan before the inexorable, invincible forces of the white man's religions and political organizations, all because of the absence of that female principle that could have maintained balance and sanity. This is echoed by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's postulation that present-day Nigeria finds itself in the same quagmire as Umuofia of old because of a similar degree of machismo: Is it any wonder that the country is in shambles when it has failed to solicit the help of its better half [women] . . . for pacific pursuits, for the betterment of the country?" (60).

Achebe's female characters are generally stunted individuals as above, or they are idealized as mothers in the manner of such Negritude writings as Camara Laye's Dark Child (date). The latter, maternal valorization is indicated by the meaning of Nneka -- "mother is supreme" -- as provided by Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu:

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. Your mother is there to protect you. (124)

The only women respected in Umuofia are those like Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who is removed from the pale of normalcy. Clothed in the mystic mantle of the divinity she serves, Chielo transforms from the ordinary; she can reprimand Okonkwo and even scream curses at him: "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala [the name of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves]. Does a man speak when a God speaks? Beware!" (95). Yet if Okonkwo is powerless before a goddess's priestess, he can, at least, control his own women. So, when Nwoye's mother asks if Ikemefuna will be staying long with them, Okonkwo bellows to her: "Do what you are told woman. When did you become one of the ndichie [clan elders]?" (18).
Perhaps Umuofia's shabby and degrading treatment of women and wives stems from unconscious fear of, rather than reverence for, the ubiquitous and capricious Earth goddess Ani or Ala, who wreaks such havoc on the townspeople's lives. She is the goddess of fertility. She also gives or withholds children; she spurns twin children who must be thrown away; she prohibits anyone inflicted with shameful diseases from burial in her soil. To the men of Umuofia, she must seem the embodiment of the two-faced Greek furies and Scylla and Charybdis joined together -- vengeful, unavoidable, and incomprehensible. Umuofia's men can compare to the ancient Greeks who were noted for similar female images such as Pandora, Circe, Medea, and Clytemnestra. In helpless, mortal dread of a fearsome divine female principle, they come down heavily indeed on ordinary women whose lives they can control as they like.

Achebe's Progressive Vision of Women

A cursory look at the place of women in Achebe's other works will confirm a diachronic development. In No Longer at Ease (1963), there is a discernible change in the style of Achebe's female portraiture. At the end of the novel, Obi Okonkwo yields to the implacable force of traditional ethos when choosing between his mother (representing traditionalism), who threatens to kill herself if he marries an outcast or osu, and the outcast protagonist Clara (representing the modern female). The pregnant Clara gets an abortion and fades out of the story. But at least she is cast as an educated, financially independent woman. She has the makings of a spirited, independent character, by virtue of her overseas education and profession as a nurse. She can afford to do without Obi Okonkwo.

In A Man of the People (1966), there are images of women playing traditional roles such as singers and dancers, or women adoring rich politicians like Chief the Honorable M.A. Nanga. Mrs. Eleanor John, a tough party woman and board member -- rich, independent, assertive -- lamentably is cast as a semiliterate businesswoman with no noteworthy role. We see Chief Nanga's wife, a beneficiary of the colonial, utilitarian education, dissatisfied with her husband's extramarital relationship and impending marriage to the young Edna. Mrs. Nanga complains to Odili, but when the latter sets out to unseat her husband, she reverts to her traditional role of helpmate fighting to retain her precarious social and economic position. Consequently, she remains a dependent, peripheral figure, deriving validity as a human being only from her husband.

A strong characterization in Man of the People is Eunice the lawyer. She is the fiancée of Odili's schoolmate Max, and founder of the Common People's Convention that opposes corrupt Chief Nanga and his ilk. When Max is shot by thugs of a political adversary, Eunice takes decisive, retaliatory action: "[S]he opens her handbag as if to take out a handkerchief, [takes] out a pistol instead and [fires] two bullets into Chief Koko's chest" (160). To this strong portrait, Achebe adds pointedly: "Only then [does] she fall down on Max's body and begin to weep like a woman . . . A very strange girl, people said" (160). In a story of the total breakdown of law and order, where looting, arson and political killings have become rife, a single act of retaliation by an injured girl is considered "strange."

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 (1964): 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.

In Anthills of the Savannah (1987), speaking through his alter ego Ikem, a journalist and writer, Achebe acknowledges that the malaise the African party is experiencing results from excluding women from the scheme of things. Beatrice of Anthills, who has an honors degree from Queen Mary
Achebe's new vision of women's roles and clarifies Ikem's hazy thoughts on the issue. Ikem accepts that his former attitude towards women has been too respectful, too idealistic. In the best Negritudinal manner, he has reverently put every woman on a pedestal as a Nneka, where she is just as irrelevant to the practical decisions of running the world as she was in the old days (98). Beatrice gives Ikem insight into a feminist concept of womanhood. She is articulate, independent, and self-realized, and she re-evaluates women's position, asserting, "[I]t 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!" (91-92). In Beatrice, Achebe now 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 are now largely absent. Urbanization and education have combined to broaden women's horizons. Therefore, Ikem tells Beatrice, I can't tell you what the new role for Woman will be. I don't know. I should never presume to know. You have to tell us (98). Achebe's newly envisioned female roles are to be expounded, articulated, and secured by woman herself; and the modern African woman is doing just that.

Feminism, Womanism, and Modern African Women

It is insufficient that Achebe the icon merely acknowledge the injustice of his earlier treatments of women. Feminist ideology lays the task of self-actualization on women ourselves. Like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's female characters Wanja (Petals of Blood, 1977) and Wariinga (Devil on The Cross, 1982), African women are playing active roles in their nation's histories by resisting "being pushed or tempted into accepting subservient or degrading or decorative roles" (Evans 134). They are developing what I have termed "the will to change" (Mezu 217).

In 1966, Flora Nwapa published Efuru. Significant in African feminist scholarship, it signals a long-awaited departure from the stereotypical female portraiture in male-authored African literature. The eponymous Efuru chooses her own husband and marries without his paying a dowry. She decisively deals with conflicts, radically departing from the script of the traditional African woman "in the peripheral, tangential role of a passive victim of a masculine-based cultural universe" (Mezu 27-28). But Efuru is plagued by infertility, polygyny, infidelity, and abandonment by two undistinguished husbands. She finally abjures marriage, opting for meaningful singlehood as priestess of the goddess of the river, Uhamiri, vindicator of victimized womanhood.

In Idu (1970), Nwapa again embarked on a revisionist course, now making a man responsible for infertility. Though in a similar vein the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo published a play, Dilemma of a Ghost (1965), Nwapa was for a long time the lone African female novelist's voice lamenting patriarchy. The prolific Buchi Emecheta joined the fray with The Joys of Motherhood (1980). As the female Nigerian critic, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, writes:

If Nwapa is the challenger, Buchi Emecheta is the fighter. . . . For the first time, female readers through female characters are aware of their subjugation by their fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers and sons. (62)

All of Emecheta's novels expound "the theme of female oppression, the slave girl becoming her leitmotif -- the archetypal African woman buried alive under the heavy yoke of traditional mores and customs" (Ogunyemi 62). This list of African feminist novelists, dramatists, poets, and literary critics is growing. African women feature equally in publishing -- Nwapa with her Tana Press and Emecheta with Ogwugwu Afor. African women must acknowledge gratitude to women and men -- to mothers, fathers, uncles, husbands, brothers -- who, disregarding patriarchy and traditionalism, ensured them educations. It is only through such enlightenment that African women writers have been able to dismantle the myth of
female irrelevance by challenging such archetypal roles as witches, faithless women, femmes fatales, viragos, and playthings of capricious gods. In achieving this, such women writers have been supported by some male writers, labelled gynandrists: Isidore Okpewho, Ousmane Sembène, Ngwa Thiong'o, Mongo Beti, Henri Lopes.

Given the intensely patriarchal nature of traditional African cultures, African feminism cannot be considered radical. For white European and American women, feminism has predicated itself on ending gender discrimination and demanding equal job opportunities and voting and property rights. For African and African-American women, feminist ideology reflects specificities of race, class, and culture. It is for this reason that the former has failed to make any lasting appeal to Africa and its diaspora. Because African women do not wish to alienate men, because African women do not wish to alienate the bulk of their tradition-based sisters, because many traditional African customs and mores are worth preserving, most African feminists espouse womanism, which Alice Walker defines as a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood . . . . [I]ts aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing.

The iroko is there for women to climb, after all. Educated African women, and those African women and men in exalted, decision-making bodies, must and do realize their duty to make society an equitable place for their less-privileged sisters. Equipped with education, resilience, and the will to survive, female eagles can scale and even soar over irokos, placing no limitations on their capabilities. African women are making meaningful contributions: as lecturers, professors, and presidents of universities; as commissioners and ministers, senators and governors, and chairpersons of political parties; as directors and others involved in literacy movements and campaigns against forced marriages, clitoridectomies, and obsolete widowhood practices. African women can outstrip their fictive counterparts to be partners with men in national progress and development, and to gain individual self-realization and fulfillment.

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