

EXPLORING GENDER JOURNEYS: A REVIEW OF ACHEBE'S ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH, AIDOO'S CHANGES: A LOVE STORY, AND ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS

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Abstract:

*This work examines the view of gender inequality in African society in the novels of three African fictional works. These are Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah; Aidoo's Changes: A Love Story; and Adichie's Purple Hibiscus; thereby cutting across three generations of post-colonial experience. It is an attempt to document the progress made in the search for equality as seen from the lenses of fictional literature of the author's societies. The post-colonial and feminist theories are applied to examine gender as an inheritance of colonized societies. Findings reveal the complexity of finding gender balance*** problems and the status of their efforts as portrayed in the selected literature. The primary texts, library search and relevant commentaries are the sources for present research. The work is expected to contribute to the growing body of literature that seeks to draw attention to the need for gender balance.*

Key Words: Gender, African novel, Post-Colonial, Feminism,

Introduction

The contemporary woman is tired of being invisible in a world she works so hard to keep afloat. She is tired of not being allowed to enter the club alone because she is not accompanied by a man. She is tired of being seen as a professional sex worker whenever she enters an expensive hotel all by herself. She is tired of being ignored by the waitress or gateman who respectively greets the man each time they are together because both the waitress and gateman are products of a society that teaches them that men are more important than women. The contemporary African woman is saying her sex doesn't make a second class gender. She is not given birth to in a different way neither was she delivered from another planet. She is entitled to the same respect as the man. For more than a thousand years, women have been taught to live in the shadow of men. In fact, she needs not to be taught. She naturally grows into it. She does more of the physical work with so much excitement, tiredness and depression while the man eats the fattest of meats in the pot. The popular pop singer super star, Beyonce Knowles sang "*who run the world? – girls!*" but have you heard the contemporary man often asking his co-chauvinist in a scornful manner...*Who runs the girls?* Well, we all know no one runs the girls anymore. In a vast contemporary world, the average woman has come to accept that she can be ambitious but not too ambitious. She can be successful but not too successful. She can be outspoken but not too opinionated. The woman sometimes makes herself feel good by saying "its women's world, the men just live in it," but how come these women, who own this world still crave for approval from the men; Why do they do all the dirty jobs, only for the successful kids to be linked to their father's genes

while the less successful are left to the woman? Why does she believe she must be loved by a man to feel loved? Why must she be complemented by him to feel beautiful? And why be tagged as going through a spiritual ordeal if she is thirty and still single, and forced to see it as a *deep personal failure* until she is pushed to make terrible choices.

Literature Review

Literature and religion have been identified as the site of accusations of subjectivity and bias because they are the formation grounds for the construction of subjectivities and people's perceptions self-identity. On the basis of a patriarchal worldview in the past, literature and religion were portrayed as neutral, and did not leave room for gendered perspectives. More recently, astounding volumes of research continues to reveal faults in gender relations and are finding expression in fictional works that interrogate the roles of religion as an agency of gender construction. This article showcases the diversity and depth of research that is currently taking place on the African continent in this field. Gender writers in the world had fought the battle of gender degradation as long as they can but it is easier for western gender writers who exist in a woman conscious society than the ones here in Africa. After all, they never grow up in a world where men are brought up to detest fears, weakness, emotions, tears and live in the consciousness that been very hard is been a man and expresses dominance while the woman is raised in the exact opposite direction. For this reason, there is a focus on the African gendered experience which is brought to the fore, through the critical discussion of Chinua Achebe's *Anthill of the Savannah*, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*; and Chimamanda Adchie's *Purple Hibiscus*. All these reveal the continuing gender bias, often hidden at the the sub-cultural level. African writers specifically the gender conscious ones have been able to, over time subvert gender and redefine the contradictions inherent in gender relations by relocating feminist theories in African literary context. There was a time when the African woman only and just wanted to be appreciated, approved and commended for being the backbone behind the African man because she felt that is all she should be. It is logical to say it is not the case any longer today. She is no longer just seeking to be commended or begging to be appreciated. She now demands for so much more, a spot at the top of the food chain. She won't be that woman whose responsibility is only restricted to just being the kitchen's most loyal visitor and breast feeder of the planet earth. She wants to be much more. Thanks to the feminist theory- she also has realized she can be more....and she will be. African women's 'drum beat and war cry' can no longer be ignored; their voices and texts must be heard, and what they have to say must be taken seriously. Juliana Makuchi (2014). These and so much more has been revealed in the fiction of the contemporary African writers both in the past and today. "*The higher you go, the fewer women there are*" (wangari Maathai, Kenyan Nobel laureate for peace) This is what Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi meant when she said at the that "*despite the fact that about 52% of the world's population is female, most prestigious position in power are occupied by men*",(2012). The *Ledbetter fair pay act* of 2009 in the united states reveals that a man and a woman gets qualified for the same Job but the man is paid more simply because he is a man. One begins to wonder how we would look at our daughters in the face in some years from now and give them a cogent reason(s) for this. Chimamanda agrees to disagree when she said

We have evolved but to Chimamanda, our gender perspective hasn't at all. It is a little bit different when things are used or said figuratively but when it becomes an act, it hurts more.

In a literal way, men rule the world and this made sense a thousand years ago because human beings lived in a world in which physical strength was the most important attribute for survival; the physically stronger person was more likely to lead, but today, we live in a vastly different world; the person more likely to lead is not the physically strong person. It is the more creative person, the more intelligent; the more innovative person. And as good as they come, there are no hormones for this attributes. A woman is as likely as a man to be intelligent, creative and innovative.

Despite this imprisoned myth the African woman has been encoded to live by, some women writers will never give up without a fight. This brings us to the consideration of some African writers who have addressed the gender issue seriously, as not just a problem but a philosophy that must be reformed.

Gender Mirrors, Painful Reflections

We begin with Ama Ata Aidoo's *CHANGES: A Love Story* An African feminist, Aidoo's discussions on Feminism is grounded fully in the African context. Thus, whereas western feminism tends to focus on working women chafing under the glass ceiling, Aidoo presents us with the more 'concrete' reality of African women's limiting factor, un- adorned of the complex web of frustration making up the everyday lives of contemporary west African Women. Nada Elia, *Research In African Literature* (1999:136)

Leave one man, marry another. Esi, you can. You have got your job. The government gives you a house. You have got your car. You have already got your daughter. You don't have to prove you are a woman to any man, old or new. You can pick and choose. But remember my lady, the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and all your time. Who is a good man if not the one who eats his wife completely, and pushes her down with a good gulp of alcohol? In our time, the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, and the more, the better. So our warrior and our kings married more women than the other men in their communities. To prove that they were, by that single move the best in the land. (109)

Changes: A love story is one of many of Aidoo's book with contending views on gender identities. The novel enlightens us on how the woman tries her possible best to tackle gender identity in post-colonial settings and in a more contemporary Ghana where the eyes of women are beginning to see farther than they always have. And they began to question their own role as a woman in a society where so much is expected of them and yet so little is given.

Esi Sekyi is the main character of the novel. She was one of the favoured partakers of the modern educational programmes that the country's first president Kwame Nkrumah instigated when he first led the new nation of Ghana to independence in 1954. She was one of the many women whose dilemma lies in-between a country existing in a modern world but with an old and biased traditions. With a master degree in statistic and a well-paid government job, like every modern woman, she tries to balance the job and marriage but she realizes it is so hard because despite her achievement, she is still subjected and restricted by her traditionally engulfed husband. In her quest for freedom, she opted out of the marriage which led her to meeting Ali. But according to Stephanie Holmgren: *"Although Esi's air of independence is what attracts Ali to her, it is still he who is in control in their relationship. Esi is once again subject to a man, and in her quest for independence, she ends her romantic relationship with Ali as well"*.

Esi's gender confrontations were more obvious than any other female or male gender in the novel changes. Through Esi, Aitoo reveals what every African woman who each time an inch of her devotion is removed from her man expected devotion, the home (i.e. her husband, children, house shores) she faces accusation of "immasculinity". Like any other African traditionalist of a man, Esi's husband, Oko expects so much more. He expects her to keep up with the house shores, be affectionate to him, keep him warm and if possible get him another child.... "A boy if possible" (8). Why does it have to be a boy? According to him, "Esi definitely puts her career well above her duties. She (owes) as a wife". And this makes him look bad (8). He complains to Esi that her behavior makes his friends laugh at him for not being able to control his woman. His dilemma may have been that he couldn't fathom if he was still the "head" in the relationship after all, A man is the "head" of the home. He is clearly beginning to doubt Esi's loyalty since he was brought up to believe that a man who feeds, caters and provides shelter is the sole bread winner of the house but since Esi earns more than he does, is she opting for dominance? Aidoo also reveals that she is not in support of the saying that a woman has no power over her body once she is married. A husband can mount his wife whenever he feels like it. This we witness when Oko in his quest to regain power and self-respect raped Esi. But come to think of it, is there a vocabulary like "marital rape" in the African culture? It is a highly contested issue in African societies because of the mentality that the woman belongs to the man in the same way his car is regarded as his property simply because he paid a bride price on her. Thus she is seen as little more than his property. But these men know that just like Esi's neighbours in the likes of Nana, Ena and Fusena are like most women in Africa. They have given up the fight for a better role. Holmgren asserts that

what unites these women is that they conform to the conventionality way of living, accepting inferior positions in relation to their husbands and other men. They are not so much interested in altering their positions towards men as they are creating a position for themselves to other women, because they feel unlike Esi that is a lost course, (11). One of the beauties with the novel as Olaussen would latter put it "is that these women are not primitive subdued women that uphold ancient values for their own sake, but as intelligent women conforming (sometimes with hidden resistant) to a male dominated world in order to survive(65).

As Nana point out in page (109) of the novel, *Esi* has got everything to fight back for, but they do not. This is certainly the primitive mind of most African women who believe that they must be dependent to the man

and since they have been molded that way, they make no early attempt in life to be financially buoyant and independent. They get married and suddenly they complain about a prison that was self-created since time immemorial. Aidoo made her stance when she spoke through Nana:

Certainly not, it can be changed. It can be better....but it would take so much. No, not time. There has always been enough time for anything anyone ever really wanted to do. What it would take is a lot of thinking and a great deal of doing. But one wonders whether we are prepared to tire our minds and our body that much. Are we human beings even prepared to try? Otherwise, it is very possible for life on this earth to be good for us all. My lady, everything is possible. (111).

The novel demonstrate how in a changing society, the freedom sought by women can complicate their conditions when not handled effectively. While Aitoo has not held up older generation of women as suitable examples for young ones like Esi to follow, she has shown, through the experiences of the protagonist, that the social and metaphysical spaces in sex relation that can be characterized as “free”, in literal and metaphoric term, are still largely uncharted. Through the experience of Esi, “we are initiated that the curious world of future sex relations, or post –feminist Africa where management of women’s successes and prosperity will prove to be much difficult than the management of their deprivation of patriarchy.” (Oloko.

Ama Ata Aidoo compels us to consider afresh the theoretical connections between feminism and fiction and re-examine the literary epistemology in the light of newer ways of thinking and looking at the world. In effect, those of us who look into literature for the shapes of our world will be amazed at how much the condition of women is still a decisive issue in the production of literature and its associated discourses.

Next we consider Chinua Achebe’s, *Anthills Of The Savannah*. Analysing *Anthills of the Savannah*, Greewald (2012) says with the passing of time since independence, authors have begun to turn their eyes to the more harsh realities of the present and by doing so, attempted to discuss a dialogue about the issue of women in African society.” The late Chinua Achebe as a writer of vast experience and an ocean of books, essays, critics, poems to show for it has published in the past so many works of art in which the female gender was brought down to the lowest of all levels. But a lit bit far away from post-independence, some writers including the late Achebe himself began to write with an awareness of this need for a new, more consistent and realistic vision of women in Africa.

Men’s power....goes deeper than the power based on class or race, and it is so universal, so ubiquitous and so complete that it appears ‘natural’ and until named by feminist, invincible. It is maintained by a process of socialization, which begins in the family is reinforced by education, literature and religion; it also rest upon economic exploitation, state power and ultimately, force (particularly sexual violence and rape). Humm: 27

Petersen (253-254) initially criticized Achebe. “Achebe’s much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praise worthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision making process and constantly revealed in saying and proverbs....The obvious inequality of the sexes seem to be subject of mild amusement of Achebe.” The position of this paper is that Achebe was documenting what obtained interms of gender interaction in Igbo society, but did not necessarily support it, which is why his he created a female character who is admirable, not for her socially constructed attitudes, but for the very opposite- and loved by no other than Okonkwo himself, who decries everything a woman stands for. So although it is claimed that Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* turn out to be different from his previous feminist perspectives, and that he has produced a whole new African woman, it is clear that Beatrice is a redeemed version of Ezinma.

Beatrice is a woman who “has an honour degree from Queen Mary College, university of London, projects Achebe’s new vision of women’s Roles....Beatrice gives Ikem insight into a Feminist concept of woman hood. She is articulate, independent, and self-realized....in Beatrice, Achebe now strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African Women.... (Rose U. Mezu, “*Women in Achebe’s World*, “*Post-colonial Web*).

Achebe creates Beatrice, senior assistant secretary in the Ministry of finance, as strong, independent-minded, and politically empowered Nigerian woman. This may be a contrast to what we have previously witnessed in his *“Arrow of God”* but in *“Things fall Apart”* women are persistently painted as a blind beggar who needs to be often scolded, cherished, nurtured, chastised and guided, because that was a status quo which he was documenting and Ezinma represents his true vision of the African woman. It became more obvious the kind of gender Achebe was developing into the new African society when Beatrice said in page 80-81 that the *“Every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like women lib.”* I believe by using the first person narrative “I” Achebe is making it emphatic that this should be the way a normal African lady be brought up. A self-worthy woman with a rich sense of belonging and a total freedom to her own opinions and beliefs about men and life in general and it shouldn’t be a do or die affair. Achebe is of the opinion that it takes the power of the mind of the woman to liberate herself from gender subordination. She must fight to be heard and live in the consciousness that she may have different hormones to the other sex, but that is who he is; the other sex- not the higher sex. A woman like Agatha who was given no voice represents the rest of her kind who has accepted their place as a second class citizen. There are millions of women like her today. Ones who bathe in the euphoria of a selfish culture and personal gain would rather embrace the culture rather than defile it.

Even if some women have to die unhappy and then pass the strings of unhappiness to the next female torch carrier, they are content. The paramount role of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* is to make it clear and simple *“Women play a crucial role in the future of the nations and they can no longer be ignored”*. Women are instrumental as keepers of tradition in the tribe, even as the role of tradition is changing in the face of modernity, a history of oppression and corrupt government. It is also the women especially who maintain a sense of morality and humanity during times of difficulty. Achebe is saying A woman can navigate the modern world with confidence just like Beatrice and still be attuned to her culture and the common people of the tribe. Men are not going to give in....women shouldn’t give up either. Beatrice expressed Achebe’s new stand p. 47

I tell him he has no clear role for women in his political thinking; and he doesn’t seem to understand it. or didn’t until near the end.” ‘How can you say that BB?’ he would cry, almost in despair too. For here’s a man, who has written a full-length novel and a play on the women’s war of 1929 which stopped the British administration cold in its tracks, being accused of giving no clear role to women. But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when the everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!

These words are written directly and with no proverbs or Idioms. It is too plain and straight forward. The women obviously for generations had played the role of the second citizens whose opinions matters when all hope is lost....and in the true order of things? All hopes are rarely lost. So they are presumably useless. Achebe’s opinion to his fellow gender his expressed thoroughly above. He sees the light now...and they should see it too. Dzivaaramazwoni (2014) affirms

Ikem goes to BB’s place and offers his gratitude for her showing him the light. Which to me translated as: he finally understood what feminism was, humanism. Like any other civil rights movement that seeks to put all persons on equal standing as well as opportunity. Not on some pedestal that claims that Woman is Goddess and men are not worthy, what with all their epic fails throughout the centuries, no. it simply says, we don’t want to be your footstools, neither do we want you to place us in the mid-air as demigods, for we are not that tall and our hearts yearns for your companionship. We do not want you as footstools or on a pedestal either; we just want you by our side, doing the same things that we do to navigate through life. To share knowledge with, as well as to draw knowledge from (p.51)

The Anthills of the savannah expresses a contemporary writer's yearn for change...especially different from what he had long professed in his previous works. Barnali Tahbaldar in his article on *The Role of the Nigerian Women in Anthills of the Savannah and "Home Sweet Home"* added that

Whereas Emecheta constructs the position of Nigerian women as inescapably fixed within traditional patriarchal oppression, Chinua Achebe and Ken Saro-wiwa seek to demonstrate that Nigerian women are capable of escaping the subordinate roles prescribed to them by traditional culture.”(97:2002)

It is significant to see Beatrice finally naming the deceased Ikem's daughter. The role that has been basically left to the men....but if you ask me. Should a mother not be asked to name a being she carried for good nine month and came to life through her? “What does a man know about a child anyway that he should presume to give it a name...”(page 115) .I think we have always had flops in our traditions. If Agatha can eventually escape the a position of enslavement, any woman can. We now turn to Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche: *Purple Hibiscus*.

A feminist is a man or woman who says yes! There is a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it. We must do better. Chimamanda Adiche (2012)

Unlike every of our previous focused writers who could be termed to be early contemporary writers, Adiche is blessed with a profile that fits the present contemporary Africa. She made her stand right from the very beginning. Her works raging from *purple Hibiscus*(2003), *Half of a yellow Sun* (2006) down to *The thing around your neck* (2009) and *Americanah* (2013) has vastly expressed the voraciousness of African Womanism, Feminism, Gender, Gender Complementation as well as patriarchy and self-confidence in ones sexuality. Unlike her predecessors, she is never shy to say it as she has often been quoted saying that an academic Nigerian woman told her that feminism was not our culture; that feminism wasn't African....that she have been calling herself a feminist because she had been corrupted by western books and that it is a woman, made unhappy because she can't get married who calls herself a Feminist. She declares that since feminism was for the Unhappy Woman and Un-African. I decided to call myself a Happy- African Feminist. Adiche takes her gender issues to a whole new side. The emotional is paramount but she reveals the physical is worse although most of the time not noticed....or just ignored. According to fwangyil, Gloria Adu (2011:264) “Domestic violence is the most common form of gender issues raised in *Purple Hibiscus*.” Just like so many Nigerian and African women once again, Beatrice experiences this abuse in the hands of her husband and bears it all in silence. The shame associated with domestic violence, rape and other forms of indignity meted to women persist because they are afraid of the repercussions and stigma

Eugene represents so many men in Africa who hide behind religion, hold hands outside, keep up appearances, kiss in public only to turn to monsters when they are home; their wife the punching bag while the kids are the unhappy spectators. And we often ask why some men just hate their fathers. It's because while other see him, they see through him. They had met the monster inside and the proof is all over their mothers' scar-designed body. It might even become trans-generational when the so called son feels that's how a man should treat his wife and so the knuckle runs in the family. Beatrice was often beaten, flogged with a belt by her husband Eugene. She lost a pregnancy at the peak of it all. Little wonder why so many children grow up to be so insecure and distrustful. Adiche would later dish out to us how the father who claims to love Kambili and Jaja the most hurts them so much more than the love he professes. He expresses every act of child abuse at the slightest provocation. The kicks, the deformed finger of Jaja; the legs in hot water and the unconsciousness of Kambili after so much beating are proofs that the female gender and the children are still treated as second class citizens who have no say in their own affairs. This is unlike Ifeoma who knows her rights, is educated and cares not much about the opinions of her in-laws because she is fearless and strong-willed. Little wonder why Kambili looks up to her as a role model. The poor girl wouldn't want to end up like her mother. Women are consistently regarded as second class citizens, thanks to traditional beliefs and myths that ensure she is permanently placed in the secondary position. It is also believed a woman has no worth outside marriage because “A husband crowns a woman's life”....even if the crown is a replica of vulnerability, beatings, cultural invincibility; loss of freedom to her basic human rights and respect. She must enjoy the pain because it is the joy of motherhood. Beatrice and her sister-in-la, Auntie Ifeoma, work together in the novel to create a dynamic and complex representation of the post-colonial Nigerian woman. The women are essentially opposing models of post colonialism feminism. Beatrice is docile and traditional, yet finds the strength to quietly rebel against the power of her husband. Ifeoma is zealous, strong and vocal about her disapproval of the current gender relations in Africa. The legendary

Amiri Baraka might have had them in perspective when he said, “When a person is shown more hatred than love...he becomes hateful as well.” Adiche is clamoring that although there are two kinds of women of which we see in *Beatrice and Ifeoma* respectively, they can break the barriers tradition and the society has created for them even if seen from the spectacle of been docile, passive and weak. Together, women can finally claim what is rightfully theirs, the right to live...not just exist. This novel made women to work hard to debunk the age-long myth by asserting themselves and proving their mettle, regardless of the obstacle the face. It is written with a perspective to encourage men with negative attitude towards women to change. The outcome is usually brutal as seen in the last chapter of *Purple Hibiscus*. Adiche is ultimately saying the woman can always fight back.....if she chooses to.

CONCLUSION

It was Dr. Betty Roynolds (2001) who once said that the human race is in the midst of a sweeping shift in human potential. According to her, the movement of women the subjugated position of second class on societies’ status ladder “to a more equal and respected existence will have a far reaching impact on human society”. She says while the shift is by no means complete, the ubiquitous the progress made in the latter half of twentieth century is impressive compared with the state of womens’ condition up to that point. Andy Greenwald has said that the gender issues in Africa are like the issues of Colonialism and cannot be solved with the same old solutions. Without novel approaches, the pattern of failure will continue and in the words of Trinti T. Minh-Ha: “Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meaning and always equipped with a second hand memory” (Post-colonial Reader: 264) Likewise the past is not forgotten in the African novels. It is only re-interpreted. Gender issues are not new. The hunger for attention and reformism is just refreshed.

Finally, if one sincerely pondered over the gender issues in Africa and in the world as a whole, it shouldn’t take deep perception or consultation to realise and do what is deemed right and without equivocation, the right side in the matter of gender is the woman’s side. What is humane or human should not be consider as a choice but the choice. If being human is respecting the female gender in terms of her age, race or colour, then all men and women should choose humanity. If being humane is giving the opposite sex the same opportunity to flourish and express herself, the we should definitely chose humanity.

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