

RECONSTRUCTING WOMEN IDENTITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH

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Abstract:

African literature is the mirror of African community in which African social reality is depicted. Gender issue is one of the main themes that are a matter of interest to the majority of African authors. They portrayed woman character in patriarchal African society in which male hegemony is a stereotype. In this sense, Chinua Achebe as well as his fellows did not stray from the rule in their writings. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, woman is considered as a second class citizen, and gender inequality is a predominant aspect. However, Achebe's narratives shifted from covering and ignoring women rule to unveiling and reshaping their own identity in his *Anthills of the Savannah*. For that reason, the objective of the present paper is to determine how Achebe reconstructs women identity by focusing on the character of Beatrice, the female protagonist in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. By adopting post-colonial and feminist perspectives, the present research work attempts to clarify the recreation of new African women and their empowerment in the post-colonial Africa

Key Words: Gender, Women, Identity, Patriarchal Society, Post-Colonial Africa.


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1. Introduction

Africa is the birthplace of the cultural plurality that is reflected in its social traditions and beliefs. Africans establish their communities and ways of life on the basis of certain cultural aspects that control in many ways the way of thinking and the behaviors of individuals in these societies. Gender inequality is a feature that shapes the majority of African communities and represents a relevant theme to be discussed by writers and sociologists. Since African societies are patriarchal in nature, there is a philosophy that sustains gender inequalities and roles. In this context, patriarchy is the declaration of male hegemony where men are assumed to possess more prestige and power than women (Falola, 2003).

Unlike sex, which can be defined as a biological function that distinguishes between males and females, gender is regarded as a social concept. It integrates society's rendition of sex premised characteristics and binds a culturally created value to the discrepancy and peculiar roles of each sex. For instance, allocating women the job of bringing up children after birth is a socially delineated role (Mhindu, 2014). In this sense, Green and Khan (1985) stated that gender is neither a biological granted nor a divine remit, but a socio-cultural conception that is a crucial topic of study for any humanistic. In patriarchal communities, male attributes are highly estimated more than female characteristics and womanhood is invisibilized (Ford, 2002).

Gender issues and women identity are widely discussed by African novelists in many ways and from different perspectives. Chinua Achebe as the father of African literature is well known by his sexist presentation of women in his narratives. In his early novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe tended to represent African women in a negative picture by limiting and marginalizing females role in the community. However, this doctrine was changed with the publication of Achebe's sixth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. The latter broke the mold since it unveils women competencies beyond their innate abilities such as giving birth and raising children. Achebe, in this novel, created a new female protagonist that represents the strong empowered post-colonial women. For that reason, this paper aims to determine the way Chinua Achebe utilizes to reconstruct women identity in *Anthills of the Savannah*. It is designed to answer the following research question:

- How is women identity reconstructed in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*?

2. Women's Image in Chinua Achebe Narratives

Chinua Achebe is a seasoned author who has great impact on the African literary scene. The role of men and women in the community, along with societies' conceptualization of the difference between the two genders are predominant topics in his narratives. In this regard, he has been reproached as a sexist writer due to his indiscriminate portrayal of patriarchal Igbo community that is characterized by male hegemony, polygamy and women beating and humiliation (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N & Asuzu, S. I, 2019). These features are widely figured in Achebe early writings such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The two novels portrayed the traditional culture of Igbo society and individuals' relationships in this patriarchal community.

Things fall apart is a novel that depicts the life in Igbo community. According to this society's belief, women do not have any permission to lead a family or a society. They are excluded from meddling in social, political and economic problems. Male hegemony, however, emerges as a principle in Igbo culture where power is often summoned as the most prominent aspect used by males to establish their own identities as the led representatives

of humanity (Priya, 2022). In this context, Achebe portrayed female characters in *Things Fall Apart* as marginal figures without real identities. He usually depicted women as weak, dependent and short sighted (Ouarodima, 2018). Similarly, Nnolim (2009) stated that “there is no happy marriages in Achebe, no soft and romantic moments between husbands and their wives, no intimate family counsels involving a father, his wife and children...” (p.151).

Achebe, in this case, tended to nullify the role of women in Igbo community and fix their relationship with men by set of standards and rules. He usually represented women as second position citizens who have locally guided jobs and complimentary status to men. For example, women are assumed only to cook and do other domestic works such as cleaning house and looking after the children (Ouarodima, 2018). For that reason, the story of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* centres on Okonkwo, the Igbo tough man who controlled his family with rigid rules. His wives lived in fright from his hard rigorous personality and suffered psychologically and physically but they afraid of whine plainly since they belong to him according to Igbo cultural traditions (Priya, 2022). These features can explain clearly that the man is the pivot of this community and women are treated as outsiders who lack any value and identity.

Arrow of God, as well as, *Things Fall Apart* is a novel that reveals the way women and girls are treated to satisfied men dominance. In this sense, Achebe in his *Arrow of God* highlighted some traditions regarding women identity in his Igbo community. The latter has customs that question women’s chastity before marriage. This occurred when Okuata, one character of *Arrow of God*, was interrogated about her virginity in front of her people. In this case, Achebe displays the importance of women’s virginity that seems to be a risk in Igbo customs which proves the vulnerability of those people. Additionally, *Arrow of God* accentuates the high status of men in the community that prohibit them from beg a favour openly from women even though they are their wives (Hassan, 2016). Thus, in these early novels, Achebe neglects women identity in order to give a real image about his Igbo people and their way of life in colonial period. However, he changes this canon by the publication of his *Anthills of the Savannah* that created equilibrium between the role of both men and women in the post-colonial African societies.

3. Women’s Image in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*

Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* is a political novel that portrays post-colonial Africa. It reflects the political realities in Africa particularly In Nigeria (Kangana). Unlike his early narratives that fostered male hegemony and chauvinism, Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* is an exceptional work that attempts to unveil women identity and promote their identities as dynamic individuals in the community (Mhindu, 2014). In this novel, Achebe created a diachronic conversion of women’s character from victims of patriarchal societies to independent, political conscious educated and self-assertive personality through Beatrice character, the female protagonist in *Anthills of the Savannah* (Nwagbara, 2009).

The characterization of Beatrice as a major character in the novel illustrates Achebe’s devotion to offering a new meaning to womanhood against what traditional customs and values rendered (Nwagbara, 2010). In this sense, he tends to portray the post-colonial women through a set of characteristics which are: Educated with prestigious position, Independent and self -conscious, Rejecting patriarchal dominance and A revolt against out-dated traditions.

3.1 Educated with Prestigious Position

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is a novel that depicted the female protagonist as a subversive of Igbo's traditions that indoctrinate women proprieties as illiterates, wives and house makers. Beatrice, in this case, violates the norms by her education and working. Sam, the head of the state clarified that when he introduced Beatrice to the foreign guests:

Lou, this is one of the most brilliant daughters of this country, Beatrice Okoh. She is a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance—the only person in the service, male or female, with a first-class honours in English. And not from a local university but from Queen Mary College, University of London. Our Beatrice beat the English to their game. We're very proud of her. (p.75)

The expressions of Sam reflect his admiration and pride for Beatrice's personality who developed her competencies to find a place in a male chauvinist society. In this context, Achebe shows the significance of education in constructing women identity and creating a new community that based on opportunities' equality between men and women.

3.2 Independent and Self-Conscious

Being an independent woman and liberating the self from male control and hegemony is an unfamiliar aspect in Igbo customs. Beatrice from her foreign education acquires some western characteristics that promote independency and self-confidence. These traits appear in the feedback of Beatrice on the English man's sarcasm of Sam. She said: "Tell me, would you walk up to your Queen and say, 'Hi, Elizabeth?'" (p.59). This reaction indicates her strong character and self-confidence that are not attributes of Igbo women.

Similarly, Chris, Beatrice boyfriend, proves the previous idea when he describes her: "Beatrice is a perfect embodiment of my ideal woman, beautiful without being glamorous. Peaceful but very strong. Very, very strong." (p.63). Chris as an educated person looks at Beatrice like an ideal that Igbo women should follow. In this case, Achebe changes the canon that puts women at the mercy of male dominance. He shows the ability of females to express her selves and creating their identities beyond men and their rules.

3.3 Rejecting Patriarchal Dominance

Patriarchal communities are characterized by the absolute authority of men and the neglecting of women's role or restricting it in household works. Humiliating women and considering them as a private property of men are common in Igbo community. Sam, the state head, intends to humiliate Beatrice in front of his American friend by ordering her to spend a night with him. Beatrice reaction reflects her strong personality. She said:

Why am I here? Why was I sent for?... Why was I there then? To meet this American girl and arrange to give her the woman's angle.... And then came the master's voice summoning me to have my turn in the bedchamber of African polygamy! (p.80)

Achebe, in this case, depicts the ability of a woman to reject men's carnal desires that regard women mere body for their pleasure. Through Beatrice reaction, the author indicates that women have their own identity that liberates them from oppressive customs which consider them as males' slaves.

3.4 A Revolt against Out Dated Traditions

Igbo community is well known by its traditions and indigenous customs alongside Christian beliefs that reflect its African identity. Since they are Christians, Igbo people tend to show their adherence and devotion of applying Christianity doctrine. The latter is usually performed by males. As a revolution to this rule, Beatrice accomplished the christening of Elwa's baby girl although this ritual is preserved to old males in Igbo society:

Beatrice had decided on a sudden inspiration to hold a naming ceremony in her flat for Elewa's baby-girl. She did not intend a traditional ceremony. Indeed except in the name only she did not intend ceremony of any kind. (p.217)

Through this behaviour, Beatrice demonstrates her ability to perform males' works from Igbo people perspectives even though she violates a sacred rite in her religion. Achebe shows that women can be rebels on unfair traditions if they arm themselves with self-confidence and believe in their competencies.

4. Conclusion

In nutshell, the present paper aims to determine how Chinua Achebe reconstructs women's identity in his *Anthills of the Savannah*. The latter gives a new image of African women's identity in the post-colonial era. Achebe, with the character of Beatrice, tends to reconstruct a new African woman figure that is portrayed as educated with prestigious position, independent and self-conscious, dismissive of patriarchal dominance and a revolt against out dated traditions. *Anthills of The savannah* reconstructed the African women's identity and shifted Achebe's writings about women from portraying them as illiterate, victims and humbled by the male hegemony to educated, independent and empowered personality.

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