

**COUNTER FEMINISM: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND JOHN
MUNONYE'S *THE ONLY SON***

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Abstract

It is a general belief that the colossal and impulsive growth of African ingenious literature and the grave enthusiasm surrounding it have not always given impressive concentration to the female folk. This limited overlook as diversely argued does not correspond with the past actuality of their existence and experience especially regarding their colonial and postcolonial status. Despite the fact that the traditional society was generally regarded as 'a man's world', yet the African woman in her existence had enjoyed her venerated roles of wife and mother, coupled with prominent roles in the cultural, social and political spheres. They are the mother, wife and home managers. Their roles are very important for the mere fact that they assist God in the process of creation thereby ensuring lineage continuity. This is why she becomes so uncomfortable when procreation fails to favour her even when her husband and family members prove supportive. Her impact is always felt in the families and the society and her absence spells doom for the community. Why then are all hell let loose at the mention of 'feminism' and suddenly they started feeling marginalised? This article is an examination of the elevated female characters in the patriarchal societies of Chinua Achebe and John Munonye to buttress that male writers in the so-called patriarchal society do justice to the female folks. Their cries for emancipation were mere camouflage. This will be done from the archetypal point of view.

Introduction

The woman in the traditional African society certainly has well defined and spelt out roles and divine functions accorded to them as a result of their nature. This could be the reason she has not craved for liberation in the same hostile mode of her European equivalents. Guy Hunter affirms to the assertion when he states:

Perhaps in almost all African societies the woman has a "kingdom" of her own with both its obligations and its recognition. She frequently has responsibility for the cultivation of land; for the preparation of food, with all its customary significance; for rituals concerned with fertility; and in settling a host of questions concerned with the marriage of young people and the obligations connected with it (28).

Understanding Feminism and Counter-feminism

Feminism is a struggle to redefine the position of women which the society's representations have confined to the domestic sphere, while public life was reserved for men. Over decades, feminism has assumed a wider meaning to connote a collective term for systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's

rights and women's position in culture and society. On the other hand, Counter-feminism looks at opposition to some or all forms of feminism. This opposition has taken various forms across time and cultures. Some antifeminists have argued that feminism has resulted in changes to society's previous norms relating to sexuality, which they see as detrimental to traditional values or conservative religious beliefs. Counter-feminism is also called anti-feminism and covers all theories and norms that counter the feminist positions about women.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts the archetypal approach to criticism. This approach to the criticism of literature has its foremost practitioners in Northrop Frye and Carl Jung (Hardin: 42). Archetypes are ancient images, pictures and beliefs resident in the human psyche and subconscious but are drawn to the physical and tangible world when they manifest in literary creative processes. Archetypes according to Dele Bamidele (11) have a tinge of universality in that these images resident in man's sub-consciousness shares the same meaning and essence in literature all over the world. They are beliefs, actions and phenomena that iterate in the human world. For instance, that tortoise is filled with selfish intrigues and tricks, is attributed to various narratives emanating from all parts of the world and that women or the female folk are weak and gullible cannot be doubted by all societies. In comic stories, domesticated animals like sheep and dove symbolize innocence and peace while in tragic narratives, beasts and birds of prey like vultures, serpents, wolves etc symbolize death and decay. They all constitute archetypes of pastoral images. Man is placed in a world where he is master only to animate and inanimate objects below him; the ancestors, spirits, gods and goddess and the Supreme Being are superior to him. For man to maintain a harmonious rhythm with his world, he has to seek the favour of these supernatural forces. This conforms to Ogunjimi and Na'Alla's assertion that:

Man is at the centre of the universe and he is the linking force for all the elements in the hierarchy of African values. Unlike the supernatural forces, man inhabits another realm entirely. He lives on earth. But his survival and performance on earth hinge on the cooperation from the cosmic forces at the upper realms. Man deals with those supernatural forces with respect and a level of mutual correspondence and understanding that exists between them (10).

The role of Chielo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* most exclusively reveals that supernatural forces at work in the human world and there exists some mutual understanding between them. Chiaku in John Munonye's *The Only Son* exhibits that archetypal motherly ties and devotion to the child. There has always been the general belief that the umbilical cord which binds the foetus to its mother establishes an archetypal relationship. An aberration to the love between mother and child elucidates the reason for societal chaos and reactions, a raise of the brow.

Patriarchal Society and the Sentimental Presentation by Feminists

The term 'patriarchal' simple means a society, system or country that is ruled or controlled by men. This has no negative implications because societies are meant to be governed by persons and sexes. On the other hand, matriarchy is the opposite of the former, whereby power and authority are wielded by women rather than men. In a matriarchal society or system, property and power pass from mothers to their daughters without hindrances or obstructions of any kind. Yet the men do not complain if found in such places. Why then do women paint their patriarchal societies black and claim subjugation?

Mwalimu Albert Mugambi Rutere emotionally states that 'patriarchy notoriously marginalizes women, children and weaker men...' (12). He continues that patriarchy ensures that women are subjugated because they do not matter at all. He concludes that the empowerment of women is not considered a priority. The writer fails to understand that the societal system is the determining factor of the issues within such society and that if juxtaposed with the matriarchal society, same is seen meted on the opposite sex.

Gender oppression has for a long period of time been the basic issue in novels written by women, not only in Africa but all over the world. Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo (15) affirms it as a scourge that has its source in religion, tradition and politics because according to her, these aspects of society have been structured and solidified by patriarchy to marginalise and silence women who constitute a half of the human population. She contributes that women hardly play key roles in politics or religion despite the fact that they constitute the followership and more often than not are silent to passive followers. She concludes that:

In most societies, the laws that govern and pattern human behaviour are detrimental to women's progress, leaving them in a state of powerlessness (15).

The above emphasis does not really follow logically because men in Matriarchal societies are not highly pronounced. It ought to be vice versa. But worthy of note is that the male writers in the so-called patriarchal society assign roles of prominence to woman as seen in the characters of Chielo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, who is a priestess and occupies a religious position and key role in the prose. On the other hand, Chiaku in John Munonye's *The Only Son*, is a character whose tigress attributes and endeavours accorded her a laudable post of elevated heroine. Other colonial and post-colonial novels and plays which exalt women in the society abound. But for precision, the characters of the elevated heroines in Achebe and Munonye are explored.

Chielo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

The character of Chielo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* indicates a counter-feminist representation of women by assigning prominent role to her in Achebe's work. First, Chielo is a priestess and as such, occupies a seemingly male-dominated role in a typical Igbo culture. Apart from her position as a priestess, she commands enormous influences among the people of Umuofia. This is a shift from the feminist position where women are represented as merely struggling for equality with men and not necessarily as equals to men.

In the novel, Chielo is revered for her supernatural insights into the future and a priestess of Agbala. As Umuofia's revered priestess, she plays important roles in guiding the tribe and deciding the fate of the villagers. She wields tremendous powers as she acts independently under the influence of Agbala. In the story, Chielo's prophetic abilities are definitely central to the people of Umuofia. She plays her roles religiously that when a band of fugitives from Abame flee to Umuofia and their Oracle prophecies the eventual dissolution of the Abame tribe, Chielo concurs. She is a symbol of religious authority of Umuofia and a healer of sort.

Chiaku in John Munonye's *The Only Son*

Chiaku in John Munonye's *The Only Son* is portrayed as a tigress who fights against all odds to stand up to her only son, Nnanna, and bring him in the acceptable cultural dignity of his people. Her status as a widow does not clap down her thriving dexterity for survival at all costs. She fights the persuasions to re-marry, defies all impositions and instead, relocates to her own home town in order to ensure safety and sound upbringing in line with the strict tradition of their society. The high tension between this mother and her son forms the crux of the prose. Despite that Nnanna later abandons his traditional practice to embrace the modern culture and religion; and Chiaku eventually marries Okere, she still proves her worth and unshakable prowess in her commitments towards her only son.

Conclusion

In spite of the considerable accusations of the feminists against the males and writers of the patriarchal societies of the colonial and post-colonial era, Achebe and Munonye and a host of others in their list have proved the feminists wrong. The likes of Chielo and Chiaku abound in other colonial and post-colonial works of the patriarchal society against women who claim to portray their likes in positive light. Charles Nnolim

rightly indicts female writers' portrayal of their female characters, which they did not present even so well. According to him:

The women, in Nwapa's fiction were out to please themselves, even if quite often they are burnt by their outrageous behaviour. So Nwapa paints pictures of women who are determined to carve out for themselves social, economic and emotional independence in a world dominated by the unavoidable presence of men.

For Nnolim, Flora Nwapa's women are downright callous, outrageously exploitative, egregiously immoral and unashamedly opportunistic that buttresses even the acclaimed feminists.

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