Women and Nature for Plunder: an Ecofeminist Study of Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People

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Abstract
Nature and women have through all ages been victims of exploitation, oppression and subjugation. Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People recreates the exploitation of both nature and woman. While A Man of the People has enjoyed wide-ranging critical examination, and unlike Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God which have been examined from ecocritical perspectives, not much has been done to underline Achebe's ecofeminist underpinnings as depicted in the novel. This study, therefore, examines A Man of the People through the Ecofeminist critical lens as this allows for a nuanced examination of the connectedness of the domination of women and natural resources in the novel. By engaging Achebe's all-time famous text, A Man of the People, through the Ecofeminist lens, the study serves to underscore the complex gendered drama that unfolds when women and nature are exploited by capitalist patriarchs. The study draws attention to Achebe's master craftsmanship in exposing the complex network of forces that have over time sought to objectify women and nature, in service of selfish interests. The study concludes by drawing attention to Achebe's vision for emancipating women and nature from bearing the brunt of capitalist modernity.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Emancipation, Ecocriticism, Dominance

Introduction

Like Okonkwo the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, who was well known throughout the nine villages and beyond, and whose fame rested on solid personal achievements, Achebe is well known throughout the continents and his fame has spread faster with every publication. Achebe's works have all enjoyed critical examination; they have been analysed using diverse approaches and methods, with methods varying from anthropological to psychological and ecological. While Achebe's Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God and Anthills of the Savannah have been examined from ecocritical perspectives (Michael Lundblad (2011), Stella Okoye-Ugwu (2013)) Gitanjali Gogoi (2014), Elaine Savory (2014) and Senayon Olaoluwa (2015) are a few examples)), A Man of the People has not enjoyed such critique. Hardly acknowledged has been Achebe's insightful recreation of the exploitation of women and nature as recreated in A Man of the People. This may be due to the text's overt political concerns with the newly independent nation, a pseudonym for Nigeria. By examining A Man of the People through the Ecofeminist lens, the study draws attention to the text's largely unnoticed representation of the despoliation of the environment and the woman, underscoring the interconnectedness of their exploitation by the agents of capitalist patriarchy.

Ecofeminism presents an important and novel approach to the examination of society, and in this case, literary texts, which mirror society; ecofeminism is a cultural practice, a theory as well as activism. According to Josephine Donovan (1996:161), Ecofeminism is a new vein of feminist theory that critiques the ontology of domination, whereby living beings are reduced to the

status of objects, which diminishes their moral significance, enabling their exploitation, abuse and destruction. The African society, for instance, degrades the woman and nature because the society lacks education and full comprehension of the woman and nature. The woman as well as nature are deemed to be objects, not subjects, and because objects could easily be used and dumped, sapped and replaced, objects are devalued. At the base of Ecofeminist discourses are the correlation between the capitalist exploitation of natural resources and how these exploitations relate to women. As an upshot or outgrowth of feminism, ecofeminism exhumes gender discourses and oscillates between the naturalization of the feminine and the objectification of both nature and women. This study examines the roles of patriarchal capitalists as they mutate between the subjugation of an already degraded environment and their women in Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People.

Previous studies that employed the ecofeminist theory to analyse African literary texts focused on narratives with overt ecological concerns and overt feminist concerns. In the Nigerian literary and critical landscape, for instance, Ojedoja Sanjo (2018) examined through the ecofeminist theory the representation of the feminine and natural liberation from domination and violence in Flora Nwapa's Efuru. In "Women and Ecology: An Eco-Feminist Reading of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart", Jane Nkechi Ifechelobi and Ikechukwu Emmanuel Asika (2017) underscore how Achebe uses the character of Ani, the earth goddess and Ezeani, the priest of the goddess, to showcase the importance and similarities between women and nature. Kaine Agary's debut novel, Yellow Yellow published in 2006, has especially benefitted from an ecofeminist critical gaze. While Florence Orabueze (2015) examined the woman's body as a metaphor for the ecological

degradation and domination of nature in Yellow Yellow, Olubunmi Ashaolu in "The Ensnaring Oil: an Ecofeminist Critique of Kaine Agary's Yellow Yellow" (2019) employs Yellow Yellow to advance a critical discourse on the closeness between the joint exploitation and degradation of the African woman and her environment. Other ecofeminist examinations of Agary's Yellow Yellow include Charles Feghabo (2014), Ifeoma Odinye (2018) and Egbung Ede (2019). On the larger African space, Wangari Maathai's renowned memoir published in 2007, Unbowed: A Memoir, Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions (1988) and The Book of Not, and Sindiwe Magona's Mother to Mother (1998) are examples of texts that have been critically engaged using the ecofeminist theory.

In this study, critical attention is focused on Achebe's A Man of the People, which is in itself a cultural artefact. It is widely understood that much of the oppressive activities against women and nature is rooted in culture, and so Donald P. St. John's elucidations in his introduction to Charlene Spretna's article titled "Ecofeminism: Our roots and flowering", are as apt as they are valid:

> Whether we speak of a change in paradigms or a transvaluation of symbols, the causes of ecological devastation are in the minds and hearts of human beings. We are shaped by the language, symbols, rituals, "myths," and behaviour patterns of our cultural traditions. Thus, culture is both the problem and the solution, both our curse and our hope. The depth of our understanding of these cultural dynamics will affect the depth of our ecological wisdom or

> eco-sophia… That the earth has traditionally been imaged as feminine provides a clue to the connection between the oppression of the earth and the oppression of women that began in earnest with the rise of patriarchal religion and culture some six to seven thousand years ago… Patriarchal society, in which the male definition of reality is normative and in which fear of women and nature set the stage for biocide, must be named as the problem. The term anthropocentrism deflects our attention from the real problem and hence the real solution to the ecological crisis we face. Ecofeminism becomes, then, of inestimable value (1990:1).

The study examines the representation of the oppression of women and nature in A Man of the People; the impetus is to highlight and draw a nexus between Chief Nanga's exploitation of the people's natural resources and how he extends the exploitation to the women in his life, and what these representations portend for the large African society.

As a politician and Honourable Minister for Culture, Chief Nanga has access to and controls the country's natural resources which he manipulates to his selfish advantage, a manipulation he extends to his women. Besides Chief Nanga, Odili Samalu and other male characters in the novel are also capitalists who objectify and exploit women for their benefit. Indices of the objectification of both nature and women are illuminated at the beginning of the novel during the welcome ceremony of Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga at Ananta Grammar School. The event portends what Franciose d'Eaubourne harangues in Braidotti Rosi et al (1994) that both the destruction of the environment and male-dominated systems of power are the most urgent threats to the world's survival. This thaws into how hunters in the novel, in the acrobatic

display would "take aim at a distant palm branch and break its mid-rib" (2). This is a pointer to the objectification of nature by patriarchal power structures which see nature as an object to be manipulated and destroyed in a bid to assert masculine power; the same is extended to the treatment of women. Ecofeminist Susan Griffin (1989) links this thus: "like the forests we destroy, or the rivers we try to tame, we are nature (10)". This sets the backdrop for all the manipulations in the novel. This action renders nature as the Other. The mid-rib of the palm branch can be broken. The palm tree whose yield is highly useful for myriads of both domestic and economic uses but is herewith treated as the Other, a non-essential under the wings of patriarchal power structures. This becomes a signifier of Max Oelschlaeger's ideological standpoints in The Idea of the Wilderness (1991) where he asserts that nature is the other, a passive silent object that is readily available for human manipulation.

In the same vein, Edna, the proposed second wife of Chief Nanga is the ostentatious tool which Chief Nanga intends to use to uplift his patriarchal power after domesticating his first wife. Chief Nanga exhibits in his character a penchant to conquer, domesticate and exploit the women in his life. Edna is the proposed 'parlour wife' with the role of 'play hostess at his parties' since his silenced first wife is "too busy for his present position" (24). The role given to Edna is domestic, despite her education, affirming Vandana Shiva (2009) that "women are devalued first because their work cooperates with nature's process and second because work which satisfies needs and ensures sustenance is devalued" (277). Hence, Edna, though educated is only fit to serve at parties, thus enforcing social power structures that separate masculine and feminine

structures where the superior male exists against the female (Mellor 1997).

Furthermore, Karen Warren (1997) divulges the inner recesses of Chief Nanga's exploitation of his wife as observed by Odili Samalu. To Warren, men deny women roles as speaking objects, and keep them dependent on the men; this economic domination helps keep women indebted, passive and silent. Mrs Nanga has become passive just like nature in the hands of humanity. Chief Nanga and the men in her life have used gender stereotypic roles to relegate, silence and locate her under the watch of patriarchy. She laments:

> I passed the entrance to a secondary school… but Eddy's father and his people kept at me to marry him, marry him, and then my parents joined in; they said what a girl wants with so much education? So, I foolishly agreed. I wasn't old enough to refuse. Edna is falling into the same trap… (95)

This lamentation comes out from a heartbroken woman whose potential has been crushed by patriarchal structures; whose powers she is too weak to fight but has resigned to fate. This is observed by Odili during a conversation with Mrs Nanga:

There was no hint of complaint in her voice. She was a homely, loyal wife prepared for the penalty of her husband's greatness. You couldn't subvert her. (39)

She resorts to silence. She is intimidated by her lack of education and resigns to fate as she says she cannot go to America because "I am too old and too bush" (94). She is not perturbed as a new wife is to be married to 'assist her'. She sees Edna as one in the same boat as her.

Patriarchal plunder is Edna's everywhere she turns. She is not just a victim of patriarchy- the government of the men, by the men and for the men; she is a victim of capitalist patriarchy. She embodies an anthology of domination projected by Josephine Donovan (1996) where a human is reduced to the status of objects, diminishing their moral significance, and enabling their exploitation, abuse and destruction. This is enabled, first, by her father, then Chief Nanga and Odili, the narrator. Edna's father displays an attitude which is intimately linked to men's perception of women as embodied in tribal cultures. Since African traditional practices and religion permits more than one wife and concubine, Edna's father sees this culture as a way to manipulate and exploit his daughter to his advantage, without due consideration for her choices and happiness. The narrator perceives him as a "greedy, avaricious father" (100), who can give out his young, promising and educated daughter to be married to an old man as a second wife, because of his gains. He uses his belief in African culture as a cloak to feed his greed which has become a priest in Anata. Edna is her father's leverage for daily meals and general upkeep. He wants his in-law to "bring and bring and bring and I will eat until I am tired" (99). Edna is in a fix in this decision-making process. She is handicapped by her father's inordinate wish. She confides in the narrator thus:

I have noted carefully all that you said about my marriage. You should pity poor me, Odili, I am in a jam about the whole thing. If I develop cold feet now my father will almost kill me. Where is he going to find all the money the man had paid on my head? So, it is not so much that I want to be called a minister's wife

but a matter of can't help. What cannot be avoided must be borne… (120)

She is exploited by her capitalist father whose greed subjects her to become the second place in a man's heart. The tone of this letter is suggestive of the fact that her hands are tied and she has lost all sense of opinion as an adult; to her father, she has become a mere object.

In addition, Chief Nanga, on the same web, is an ardent opportunistic capitalist whose access to the state's resources allows him to manipulate the poor in his constituency to his personal and selfish advantage. He uses state resources (capital) as a factor of production to invest in Edna's education to yield profit, which will be his marriage to her. His sponsorship of her education is not borne out of compassion or the onus of responsibility as a leader from her community; rather it is geared towards his selfish patriarchal chauvinism. As a result, Edna's education appears tainted, because it is earned from the proceeds of capitalism. Her education does not reflect in her utterances and behaviour. She remains the archetypal objectified woman, educated, yet silenced and bowed; she makes utterances like "that is the world of women" (106), "what I pray for is happiness. If God says that I will be happy in any man's house I will be happy" (120). This shows that she has resigned to a fate like every other oppressed woman. This prototypic woman is whom Warren (1997) categorizes as indebted, passive and silenced because she has been kept under the focal lens of the patriarchal eye, intimidated by capitalist wealth.

Antithetical to the feminist ideology that the domination of women is heightened by limiting their education is the position of ecofeminist critical standpoint. Judging from Edna's situation, education is given but it becomes bait, just in the same way that nature's resources are harnessed to the fullest but are manipulated

to meet the selfish needs of man. Edna's education is given on one hand and taken on the other hand. This debunks feminist claims that limited education facilitates matriarchal silence since other sociological factors can conjure an educated woman into silence. In all ramifications, Edna is a pawn in the hands of patriarchy. She is tossed from one capitalist "saviour" to the other. It is then as Ama Ata Aidoo relates in the notable article "No Saviours" (1969:32), that "there have never been people to save anybody but themselves, never in the past, never now, and there will never be any saviours if each will not save himself. No saviours. Only the hungry and the fed". Indeed, for Edna, there is no saviour anywhere, her help can only come from within. This is evident with the coming of the narrator, Odili whose goal was to "redeem her", for his selfish ends. With Odili's proposal, Edna has only changed masters; she has just successfully switched from one master to the other.

Edna is like the nation, who thought that those who called for her independence did so out of love, but it was done out of their selfish interest. This stands akin to Funsho Aiyejina's poem titled "And so it came to pass" (1988):

And so, it came to pass/ many seasons after the death/ of one saviour/ that a new crop of saviours/ armed with party programmes/ came cascading down our rivers of hope/ men we had taken as fearless warriors/ as protectors of our secret/recipes/ suddenly turned crabs, carapace and all… (19)

This is the perfect picture of the attitude of Odili Samalu and Chief Nanga to Edna. The new saviour is on a private mission to get Edna from Chief, not with the purest of intent which is love but for revenge on Chief. Relating Edna to nature, the narrator describes her as "a dust particle in the high atmosphere around

which the water vapour of my thinking formed its globule of rain" (142). Hence, to him she is like nature, an object, to be exploited. His prodding, rooting, concern and show of affection, urging her to end her relationship with the Minister is for "revenge" and "political ambition". Odili intends to marry Edna to spite the minister and to pay him back for sleeping with his ex-girlfriend Elsie. To Odili, Edna does not know what she wants, and hence, she has to be delivered from herself. This is akin to the treatment nature gets in the narrative and consonance with Heather Ingman's (2005) assertion that "nature is irredeemably fallen and therefore needs to be tamed, in the same way as women, responsible for original sin, also needed to be controlled" (517). Edna is a pawn in a chess scheme simply for the reprisal of a previous attack by Chief Nanga; she is a massage to Odili's political ego.

Ingman (2005) argues that both women and nature suffer exploitation by the destructive technologies of patriarchal society, particularly in the realm of militarism, capitalism, industrialism, and genetic and reproductive Engineering. This is the case in the novel as there is a striking link between the manipulation of Edna and natural resources in the novel. Nature is trampled upon as industrialization, civilization and politics burgeon. The rich political class continues to build and acquire more houses, lands and women as they loot the nation's treasury. Chief Nanga has four storeys that he is building in his village, close to his present house. Describing the house, Chief Nanga's self-acclaimed Poor Innocent Victim (PIV) brother relates that "The house in question was the very modern four-storey structure going up beside the present building and which was to get into the news later" (69). The house, besides being another overt display of Chief Nanga's greedy conquest, is a proceed from corruption: "It was, as we were to learn, a 'dash' from the European building firm of Antonio and Sons

whom Nanga had recently given the half-million- pound contract to build the National Academy of Arts and Sciences" (69). Likewise, the Minister of Construction has houses that he rents to embassies at exorbitant prices. They are all myopic capitalists who count their wealth in the number of useless houses they build and the streets and avenues that are named after them. Wealth, no matter how ill-gotten, is the new god in the land, and greed is its priest.

Over time, nature is imagined as a female, one that is to be subdued, suppressed and conquered. In A Man of the People, the novelist relates how natural resources are also subjected to the manipulation of social power. The political class manipulates nature to their advantage, especially to score political points. Hence, when the loyalty of a community is in doubt, the basic needs of humanity will be deprived of the community. This is evident in the novel after Max and other members of C.P.C launch their campaign in Anata the ruling party decides to use a very important element of nature to tame the community. Since the community can allow an opposition party to campaign in their community, the owners of social power would deprive them of their basic right to water. The narrator relates that "the culmination came at the weekend when seven Public Works' lorries arrived in the village and began to cart away the pipes they had deposited several months earlier for our projected Rural Water Scheme…" (145).

Edna is like the water scheme intended for the people. Her marriage to Chief Nanga is the reason for the sponsorship just like the water scheme is for Anata as a result of their loyalty to the ruling party. The absence of that loyalty results in the dissolution of the water project. This encompasses it all.

The voice of women and the voice of nature have been muted under patriarchy. Women and nature are considered objects under patriarchy, and objects do not speak, objects do not feel, and objects have no needs. Objects exist only to serve the needs of others. But despite our society's refusal to listen, nature has been increasingly communicating her needs to us. Nature is telling us in myriad ways that we cannot continue to poison her rivers, forests, and streams, that she is not invulnerable, and that the violence and abuse must be stopped. Nature is speaking to us. The question is whether we are willing or able to hear (Marti Kheel, 1993:260).

This is the revolution and opposition to the domination of women and nature by culture is what Achebe presents in the character of Eunice. Chief Koko a member of the ruling P.O.P party who was contending for a political seat with Max resorts to violence by running Max over with his jeep and killing him on the spot. Eunice "stood like a stone figure…for some minutes more. Then she opened her handbag as if to take out a handkerchief, took out a pistol instead and fired two bullets into Chief Koko's chest" (155). This reaction of Eunice is nature's gentle voice to its plunderers that they cannot continue to poison her rivers and that violence and abuse must stop. Hence, Eunice is the persona speaking in an Ecofeminist voice that the plunderers must be uprooted. Edna is important in herself, not just as a means to a selfish end. Towards the end of the narrative, Achebe presents Eunice as a foil to Edna, the passive "ball" always tossed to and fro, by every wind of greed. Eunice is vocal, assertive and proactive. She is not waiting for anyone to rescue her; rather she stands tall to defend the man and the land she loves.

Conclusion

Viewed through an ecofeminist lens, A Man of the People gives critical insight into the exploitation of nature and the woman. Through the narrative, Achebe calls attention to the damage capitalist patriarchy does not only to the nation, at large, but to the land and the women. By calling attention to these, Achebe fulfils what Iris Murdoch (2013) views as a work that is capable of building up structures of values around man. Achebe does not stop at calling attention to the problems patriarchal capitalists engender, he goes ahead to present the remedy, which is that the erstwhile subalterns should arise and defend themselves, as every hitherto self-acclaimed saviour will only watch out for his interests.

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