

## Female Assertion as an Antidote to Male Dominance: Mother Archetypes in Achebe's Novels—*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *A Man of the People*.

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### ABSTRACT:

There has been an intense debate with regards to Chinua Achebe's (mis)representation of women in his creative works, especially his first four novels. Some scholars have argued that Achebe is a patriarchal writer who has relegated women to the periphery. Nevertheless, a few have read subtle nuances of gender balance in his works. This paper is a continuation of this debate. Specifically, it argues that Achebe has created Mother Archetypes in his novels and if the same is not recognized, he will continue to be demonized as a gender insensitive writer. The unit of analysis is three of the five Achebe's novels namely: *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, and *A Man of the People*. The paper interrogates the aforementioned novels within the framework of archetypal criticism, with the aim of unearthing and examining Mother Archetypes inherent in them. The paper identifies religion, education, and justice as the spheres of life in which Achebe has created, empowered and elevated Mother Archetypes to be at par with their male counterparts. However, owing to the breadth of the subject, the paper dwells on education. The paper concludes that creation of empowered Mother Archetypes in Achebe's novels is a symbolic relay in which women characters hand in the symbolic empowerment baton to the next woman in the next novel until the last one where the creation of a woman major character, Beatrice, wins the race against male dominance.

**Key Terms:** mother archetypes, Achebe, antidote, male dominance

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## Introduction

It is an almost a universally accepted fact (or fallacy) that the doyen of African Literature Albert Chinua Iyemba Achebe has otherwise the female gender in all his novels except, perhaps, in the person of Beatrice in his last novel: *Anthills of the Savannah*. Achebe himself has vehemently denied this allegation, which has been advanced, mostly, by feminists, to no avail. In his self-defense, Achebe is categorical that all his novels have celebrated women. In an interview published in *The Art of Fiction*, Achebe posits:

Those who do not read me as carefully as they ought to have suggested that this (Beatrice) is the only woman character I have ever written about and that I probably created her out of pressure from the feminists. Actually, the character of Beatrice has been there in virtually all my fiction, certainly from *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, right down to *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Achebe's assertion is a testimony despite the criticism fronted by scholars who, in unison, have tried to demonstrate Achebe's insensitivity with regards to women representation, there is the other side of his works that has not been fully explored. My reading of his texts reveals women assignment to *manthre* vital societal mainstay institutions namely: religion, education and justice.

In this paper, I seek to dwell on education as one of the three elements in which critics have tended to either ignore or underscore in their criticism regarding Achebe's representation of women characters. To achieve this objective, I will seek to juxtapose Achebe's female characters against the male ones in both formal and informal education in an endeavour to exhibit that task of educating children in both the old and the new dispensations has been assigned to women. I seek to bring to the attention of other critics who have read Achebe as a patriarchal writer, among them (Azumara 2010), Nwagbara (2009), Fochingong (2006), Statton (1994) and Meja-Pearce

(1992) that the writer is gender sensitive and as such, his fiction being a representative of the successive evolution of Africa from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, women characters' engagement with education can metaphorically be read as a relay in which women characters hand in the baton to another in the next novel where the race is improved and pushed on till victory is achieved. The thrust of my paper will be on the revelation that leans towards demonstrating that education falls under the docket of female characters and any attempt by male counterparts to usurp the women's onus results into total failure. The paper employs Archetypal criticism whose main proponents are Northrop Frye and Carl Gustav Jung to aid in tracing and analysing the mother archetypal patterns across Achebe's novels being analyzed.

## Achebe's Mother Archetypes in Education System

Education is an important component of people's lives. It comes in two different forms: informal, which is largely a kind of training without classroom set up, and formal which is an official teaching set up with a clear identifiable teacher(s) and student(s). Achebe's novels interrogate pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial educational systems. Prior to the coming of the Whiteman, informal education along with African traditions was largely practiced among the Igbo community from which Achebe draws his raw material for his texts.

## Ekwefi, the Starter of Educational Relay

One of the significant characters in Achebe's first novel; *Things Fall Apart* is Ekwefi, the third wife of the patriarch Okonkwo and the mother of an only child, a girl – Ezinma. Achebe's critics have tended to concentrate on the incidence where Okonkwo unleashes terror on her, first beating her almost to death because of cutting a leaf from a banana tree and nearly shooting her for murmuring that his gun was incapable of shooting anything. I would, however, wish to bring out another perspective of viewing Ekwefi as a pivot through which education revolves. To

achieve this, I will juxtapose Ekwefi and her educational success against Okonkwo's failure in his attempt in education docket.

As pointed out earlier, education during the pre-colonial period was passed from one generation to another orally. Ekwefi emerges to be an effective oral literature teacher in an etiological narrative that she narrates to her daughter Ezinma, which adopts the formal education model since Ezinma is also allowed an opportunity to narrate hers at that tender age in an attempt to prepare her to be the teacher of her future children. The tale can be synopsized as under.

There is once a famine in the land, and the birds contribute feathers to fashion wings for Tortoise so he might accompany them to the feast in the sky. Instead of showing some gratitude for the neighbourly spirit the birds have shown, Tortoise decides to hog the best of the feast for himself; he tells his benefactors, the birds, that according to the tradition of the hosts, each of the guests must assume a new name for the occasion, and his new name shall be "All of You". When the host presents the guests with the feast, Tortoise asks for whom it is meant and the host replies, as expected, "For all of you". The stratagem not only enables Tortoise to satisfy his greed but it also infuriates the birds enough for them to take back their feathers. Tortoise is consequently compelled to come down to earth the hard way. The conclusion of the story is that: "That is why the Tortoise's shell is not smooth" (87-90).

My reading of this narrative resonates with Owomoyela point of view when he asserts that this is "... [a] story designated to illustrate the basic tenets for human relations in the community, a story whose moral is the moral of the novel itself (1991). In agreement with Owomoyela's school of thought, I vote to read this narrative metaphorically as a struggle for dominance

between inclusivity and selfishness, with the birds representing the female gender which proves to be accommodative in a way I am about to demonstrate, and Tortoise representing male gender which; through Okonkwo the protagonist encapsulates selfishness. The "all of you" declaration by Tortoise turns out, paradoxically, to be "I alone" since, in spite of the fact that he manages to eat the food alone as intended, he suffers the loss of the borrowed feathers and subsequently ends up falling down and cracking his beautiful shell. As Owomoyela further observes, the female gender in the embodiment of birds' acts with interest of communalism, banding together to help the less fortunate while Tortoise exploits others in the interest of his selfish gain (97). Informatively, Tortoise suffers a fate that discourages emulation of his way while, through implication, upholding the bird's way. In a nutshell, the moral of Ekwefi's narrative is: no individual should place his or her interest above that of the group and no individual can or should ever attempt to be "all of you" (I alone).

Ezinma's later behaviour is a manifestation of internalization of the morals derived from this narrative. One of the major feats that Ezinma accomplishes is aiding her disgraced father who had been in exile at Mbanta, his motherland village, to regain his place as an indisputable king and one of the leading *egwugwu* in his fatherland – Umuofia. To achieve this feat, Okonkwo needs to ensure his arrival after seven years in exile causes a stir akin to the biblical triumphal entry in Jerusalem that Jesus had. Okonkwo's strategy to achieve his aim includes: rebuilding his compound on a more magnificent scale – a bigger barn and huts for two new wives, initiating his sons into *ozo* society and working towards taking the highest title in the land which he can achieve on his own (155).

The next strategy needs Ezinma's input to succeed. Okonkwo considers having two beautiful girls in his company on his way home a booster for the quest his

coveted new position in the clan with future sons-in-law being men of considerable authority in the clan. Ezinma has grown into a very beautiful lady and has earned the name “The Crystal of Beauty” (157). To enable him execute this strategy, Okonkwo advises her daughter not to accept a hand in marriage from suitors in Mbanta:

Many young men and prosperous middle-aged men of Mbanta came to marry her. But she refused them all because her father had one evening said to her: “There are many good and prosperous people here, but I shall be happy if you marry in Umuofia when we return home”. That was all he had said. But Ezinma *had seen clearly all the thoughts and hidden meaning behind the words*. And she had agreed. (My emphasis) (157)

Ezinma’s education under the tutelage of her mother – to avoid being individualistic and be accommodative to others – comes in handy in ensuring her father’s desire is achieved. She fully understands her father’s aim and effectively influences her half-sister, Obiageli, in favour of his wish. Clearly, this is a manifestation of a lady who exhibits the characteristics of an educated woman, never mind her education is informal. She is able to invoke the education she received from her mother to deduce the meaning of her father’s words without any need for further prodding. No wonder her father wishes on several occasions that she were a boy. Her mother’s tutelage also explains why she wields strong influence over her half-sister, Obiageli to whom she plays the counselor despite the fact that they are age-mates. Ezinma thus easily solves Okonkwo’s dilemma and restores hope to his mission of becoming a formidable personality in Umuofia once he and his family go back home after seven years in exile.

The educational impact inculcated into Ezinma’s mind by her mother is still alive in her adult age. When the colonial administrators arrest his father, together with other elders, she is the only one who, single-handedly, initiates a

campaign to ensure they are released. The author points out: “His daughter Ezinma had broken a twenty-eight-day visit to the family of the future husband and returned home when she heard that her father had been imprisoned, and was going to be hanged” (177). Thus, marriage does not water down the effects of education passed by his mother rather she outlives the women weakness tag and fully participates in the family emergency at the expense of her male siblings, the ones Okonkwo had intended to initiate into ozo society. This point of view, however, puts my argument in contrasting opinion with Stratton who views Ezinma’s significance as that of juxtaposing her against Nwoye to highlight the qualities of masculinity that Nwoye lacks (1994).

Contrastingly, Okonkwo’s attempt to educate the lads: Nwoye and Ikemefuna (before he is killed) is an attempt in futility. Firstly, unlike Ekwefi, he does not give them an opportunity to demonstrate whether they have grasped the lessons. Again, he does not put into consideration the lessons they prefer. He teaches Nwoye stories about war and bloodshed against his preferred stories about Tortoise and his wily ways. Observably, towards the end of the novel, Okonkwo’s student, Nwoye, has joined Christianity to the chagrin of his teacher while Ezinma acts within the dictates of the morals that education system has inculcated in her. Ideally, Achebe seems to be saying that this important component of human life, education, ought to be left to the female gender.

#### **Hannah Okonkwo, the recipient of the baton in *No Longer at Ease***

Education, just like all the other changes introduced by the Whiteman was gradual. Therefore, the education system inherent in Achebe’s second novel incorporates both informal and formal education. The transition from oral to written education becomes the way to go. Obi Okonkwo becomes the focal point with his father, a staunch Christian, in fact, a Catechist, trying to teach him the strict



dictates of Christianity and his mother, Hannah Okonkwo, a liberal Christian trying to teach him to embrace both Christianity and traditional education. I will compare the two educators in a bid to demonstrate who between them register success in their mode of teaching.

The most pronounced setback to the determined Obi Okonkwo's education is the humiliation he suffers for failure to narrate a story during "Oral" lesson. The resulting derisive laughter from his classmates reduces him to tears. It is apparent that, if not curbed, this humiliation would have been a psychological setback in his educational pursuit. Obi's inability to narrate a story like his classmates is traceable to his father's conversion to Christianity and subsequent banning of all heathen activities, including the narration of folk-stories. Isaac Okonkwo had stated to his wife clearly "... [We] are not heathens... stories like that are not for the people of the church" (52). The banning of short stories is an inconsiderate attempt to have an abrupt shift from informal to formal education especially owing to the fact that any change if it is going to be beneficial, must be gradual. It is, therefore, inescapable for him to suffer humiliation in the school setting that is forced by the ongoing transition to combine both oral and written literature in a bid to be accommodative to the two cultures.

When Obi Okonkwo's educational boat appears to be almost capsizing, it is Hannah Okonkwo who steps in, taking risk to narrate an oral narrative to the besieged young man when her husband leaves for evening prayers. By so doing, she restores Obi's status to an exemplary student, the "dictionary" as his classmates used to call him (32).

Contrastingly, Isaac Okonkwo seems not to know the immediate needs of his son. He is unable to provide the necessary ingredient; in fact, he forbids it and by so doing threatens the son's educational bid with inhibition. So

skewed towards Christianity Isaac Okonkwo is that he believes all is well when it actually is not. As a matter of fact, the Obi Okonkwo that we interact with is not a Christian, actually has never been one by its strict definition. That once he goes to England, he forgets about the bible and concentrates on dancing and fornicating and once back home he betroths an Osu and disobeys his father regarding whom to marry is a sure sign that his father's education just like his father, Okonkwo, before him is a failed venture. Obi's success in education in England, a foundation that was laid by his mother is a pointer to the fact that Hannah Okonkwo's attempt to steer his educational boat is a success, a fact that augments my earlier argument that Achebe has bestowed the educational burden to women in his novels.

### Mrs Nanga's Reception of the Baton on Home Stretch

Achebe's third novel, *A Man of the People*, is introspection into the ills perpetuated by leadership that has taken over the mantle from the colonialists. In veiled sarcasm, Achebe presents a highly corrupt immoral leader, Chief Nanga, who doubles as minister for culture. Nanga is married to semi-illiterate wife – Mrs Nanga on whom I would wish to focus. Mrs Nanga does not get enough education to achieve financial and professional emancipation. She is thus embedded to her husband regardless of his immorality. However, she is consciously aware of the need for education. In one of her conversations with Odili 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 own parents joined in; they said what did a girl want with so much education? So I foolishly agreed. I was not old enough to refuse (my emphasis) (88).

This assertion demonstrates her thirst for education, which is aborted by her parents because of her tender age. The melancholic mood with which she narrates the story shows

her attitude towards it. Tellingly, her lack of functional literacy does not allow her to effectively carry on with formal education, but her area of specialization is what I wish to call "womenfolk understanding." She takes up the duty of instilling consciousness into the mind of Edna, the young woman about to be married to Chief Nanga. Naturally, she is unable to communicate her sentiments directly to Edna, as that would be interpreted as animosity towards her prompted by her husband's intention to bring her in as a co-wife. She however unconsciously communicates her thoughts to her indirectly through Odili the narrator who, in his endeavour to wrestle Edna from chief Nanga, ends up acting as a communication link between the two: "Edna is falling in the same trap. Imagine a girl straight from college not allowed to teach even for one year and look around" (88).

The contents of Odili's first missive to Edna trying to persuade her to free herself from Chief Nanga's chain of marriage is evidently Mrs Nanga's sentiments being aired through a different avenue. Her education (or lack of enough of it) plays a significant role in persuading Edna not to fall into the same trap that she was exposed to at her formative age. Later, we meet a different Edna:

I have noted what you have said about my marriage. Really 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 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 (110).

Later when the competition for the parliamentary seat between Odili and Chief Nanga intensifies and when Odili, on attending Chief Nanga's rally is attacked, she tries to rescue him, and on being hospitalized, she spends time with him in the hospital. The parting shot is when he comes to, after days in a coma and she informs him "... to be frank

with you I did not want to marry him... it is only my father..." (111).

By her becoming conscious of Chief Nanga's colonizing yoke is a sure bet that Mrs Nanga's lessons have been taken and internalised. On the contrary, Chief Nanga's approach to education is a failure. He believes in taking his children to sophisticated schools and considers it an achievement when his children speak impeccable English at the expense of their mother tongue. The failure of education as envisioned by Chief Nanga is demonstrated in his elder son, Micah, when he calls his mother "a dirty bushman" (38). Indeed such a remark from a child, civilization notwithstanding, is a demonstration of a child who has not been taught morals.

### Beatrice, the culmination of the educational relay

As pointed out earlier, there has been a near consensus by critics of Achebe's texts that *Anthills of the Savannah* has done some justice to women. I have taken time to demonstrate that in matters education, Achebe has been consistent in heeding that the success of a pupil depends on who the teacher is, with instances where women have taken up the task registering success in all Achebe's novels. It would be prudent, before making a conclusion, to point out that Beatrice has not been accorded the role of educating rather she has competed against men and emerged victorious in her own endeavour to acquire formal education. Her exceptional accomplishments are highlighted by Nwagbara who posits: "her strength of character, self-confidence and superior intellect stand out even among men" (348). Among the exceptional qualities is her impeccable credentials that even attract the attention of Kangan head of state who avows that she is one of the brilliant daughters of the country as he presents her thus:

Beatrice Okoh... Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance – the only person in the service, male or female, with 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 are proud of her. (75)

To qualify our argument that Beatrice's hyper-performance is Achebe's way of climaxing the already analyzed positive women accomplishment in the education sector, the above educational achievements can be viewed alongside the accomplishments that "teachers" in Achebe's previous novels have demonstrated. Achebe's last recipient of the relay baton, Beatrice, thus only changes the metaphorical lane but remains on course to hand women in education competition a deserved win.

## Conclusion

I will conclude this paper by arguing that Achebe's critics should read beyond the perceived physical abuse and commodification of women characters, which is

unavoidable to a writer who has committed himself to depict true African history and the temporal setting of his novels. Achebe's critics, more so feminists should not restrict themselves to only what has been recorded by the author regarding female characters; rather they should also read the implied meaning inherent in these texts. That literature does not communicate meaning directly is in the public domain; hence isolating only what the author has put in record reduces it to the level of ordinary speech where meaning is static. To be able to absolve Achebe from the scathing attack that has become the hallmark of his criticism, his readers need to unclothe themselves the garb of fixed reading and engage a keen eye that is open to nuances that harbour hidden meaning.

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