Re-visiting the African History in Pre-colonial era: The Resurgence of African Women in Chinua Achebe's Novels

Abstract

This paper intends to vocalize the muffled voices of African women which were hushed by colonizers in colonial rule. This paper contends that, though, females in Chinua Achebe's *No longer at Ease (*1960) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) are manifested to be under control of colonial mindset; however, these women are actually embedded in African history and mythology in pre-colonial era. In the African colonization era, females became the victim of the colonizer's catechizing eyes. However, colonizers documented African women as feeble and silent in colonial discourses and they directed their mission of freedom of African women from brown men's domination and local savage customs. The British Imperialist framed the colonial image of African women in the Victorian concept of womanliness, an entirely oppressed and subordinate gender. This paper debates that although the aboriginal African women inhabited under tribal male supremacy in pre colonial era, thus far, African culture granted them certain prerogatives and privileges. Moreover, this paper delineates that Achebe in his novels not only opposes the colonial portrayal of African women but also restores the status of African women by re-visiting pre colonial African culture.

Keywords: African mythology, African women, Colonization, Post-colonialism, Resurgence

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, a Nigerian novelist, commonly known as Chinua Achebe, was born in 1930 in Eastern Nigeria nearly 25 years after the British colonization of Nigeria. His parents adopted Christianity however, his grandparents remained stick to their African Igbo culture. Due to which Achebe encountered cultures of both colonizer and colonized. Achebe states in one of his interviews that "the conflict that existed between these

two cultures created sparks in his imagination" (Sickels 1). Therefore, he takes up the charge to challenge the colonial based history and perception of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular. He wants to notify the world that colonizers shouldn't be credited for bringing the culture to African land although it was already rooted in Africa (Gikandi 17).

Bill Ashcroft (2003) explains colonialism as "the practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically and culturally" (12). Similarly, colonizers not only occupied the African territory but also introduced and instilled their superior culture, religion and other social practices to the presumed uncivilized and inferior African nation. Colonial Nigeria consisted of the West Africa region which was under British rule in the 19th and 20th centuries ultimately came to be known as Nigeria. The colonial occupation lasted from 1900 to 1960. In 1906, under British rule, Nigeria discovered the colonizer's political practices and policies. White missionaries' invasion of Nigeria initially shook the roots of colonized Africans and ultimately changed their religion, African women's status and family structure.

Frantz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), examines the after effects of colonialism on the psyche of the colonized. He observes that the colonized acquired the colonizer's language, clothes, furniture, European expressions to overcome their inferiority complex ''various attitudes that the Negro adopted in contact with white civilization'' (5). Moreover, in the second chapter named ''The woman of color and the white man'' investigates that black women became fascinated with white color due to which they started an attempt to change their original black color by bleaching their skin "they seek white men with blue eyes, blond hair and light skin because they think that black is a curse unlike white, the symbol of beauty" (31).

Fanon critically evaluates that colonialism impacted the psyche of black women to the extent that they started hating the black men. The neurotic orientations compelled them to

consider black men as savages. On the other hand, colonial education and gender politics did not restrict itself to black women only, but the black men also became an admirer of white color and white women. Thus, both African genders became victims of the colonial mindset of white color superiority, "black men [wishes to] marry white women, the emblem of white culture, white beauty, white whiteness". It was not their love for the white color or people, but the way to mimic the white men to achieve a high status in the world. (55).

Moreover, the colonialism symbolizes the Negro with "animals, brutes, illiterate race and cannibals" (91). In addition to this, African women are called "libidinous and shameless as monkeys or baboons" (Young 151). It led the black men to hate each other, their African origin, roots, mythology and culture. In this concern, Fanon wants to demolish all such fictitious myths about Negro men and women fabricated by Occident "Negro belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago'' (99). Through this, he depicts the colonized class as a race with a rich background and history. Niara Sudarkasa (1986) states that women in pre-colonial Africa held prominent positions in society. They were socially, politically and economically active and at the same time handed out to the family by fetching food, weaving, and making pottery. It is true that African men were considered the head of the family and had a dominant position in society however; along with domestic chores many women were involved in trade. In African culture black women even held the prestigious titles and positions of queen-mother, queen-sister which is an indication that women had power and privileges in male patriarchal society (103).

Fanon takes the argument further to expose the hidden agenda of white colonizers; their mission was not limited to occupying the land but to enslave the African race. Therefore, the colonizers set their power and gained the mental possession over blacks by creating a gender tension in African society. The colonial discourse helped the white missionaries to label women as suppressed, other and silent beings in the Third World

countries. They put forward their strategy through different channels including "magazines, comic books and Tarzan stories where Black men are shown as wolf, evil and bad" (113). Fanon indicates that the color black became a color of inferiority, devastation, death, war and wickedness (148) whereas the white color became a symbol of imperial power, good, justice and truth (150). This dichotomy attacks the Negro's self esteem and confidence, paving a way for Occident to become the charge bearer of educating the blacks.

Achebe in his book (1978) denounces Joseph Conrad for his portrayal of Africa based on the colonizer's version of Orient in the *Heart of Darkness* (1902). He further calls Conrad a racist for the misrepresentation of Africa as an uncultured nation and the poor description of Congo River in comparison to River Thames (9). Furthermore, some of the scholars of colonialism have seen some inherent flaws in colonial discourse. Joya Chatterji (2018) claims that "colonialism very cunningly puts forward and advocates the claim that it provides ample opportunities for the colonial subjects for self-improvement and development" (150). Consequently, the colonized become more rational and abandon their primitive superstitions. A close examination of colonialism would reveal the fact that the whole edifice of colonialism is based upon an irrational racist distinction between the colonizer and the colonized, between the ruler and the ruled.

It is interesting to note that even in the present time there is a strong relationship between Christianity and colonial education and the colonial administrative system. After the arrival of the British Imperialist, colonial education played a great role in promoting the white man's cause and also served the colonial purpose of class figuration and stratification which led to the suppression of identity and consciousness of the Africans as Africans and alienated them from their own culture, traditions and customs. Walter Rodney (1972) has made a very interesting remark in this regard:

The main purpose of the colonial school system was to train Africans to

participate in the domination and exploitation of the continent as a whole…

colonial education was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation

of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment. (250)

Colonial education filled Africans with abnormal complexes which further de-Africanized them by taking them away from African roots which were necessary to direct their life and society. In a way colonialism emasculated the emerging African generations and in order to make them realize their own status and identity, it was necessary that the booming African minds should be decolonized. Ngugi (1981) says that "to gain acceptability and perpetuate domination, the colonists enlist the services and religious oriented education… to capture the soul and the mind" (50). Thus, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the newly converted Africans renounce their traditional life-style, further advancing the cause of colonialism, and its best example is the character of Nwoye – the eldest son of Okonkwo: "Nwoye had been attracted to the new faith from the very first day… and he was already beginning to understand the simple stories they told" (138). Enchanted and enthralled by the new religion, he disowns his ancestors' religion, history, culture and traditions and accepts Christianity as his new religion.

So, the ravages created by colonialism are immense which feature different aspects of colonialism; it creates cultural alienation and psychological imperialism which means mental subjugation to others. The socio-economic dependency of the colonized leads to coca---colonization and gives birth to neo-colonialism. Colonization brings Christianity, colonial education and an administrative system to destroy African old structures. White men further extend their mission to gender politics which means granting women an inferior role hitherto unknown to the African socio-political system. Thus, colonization plays a vital role in suppression, marginalization and colonization of African women.

After the decolonization of Nigeria in 1960, a critical review of colonial discourse was highly needed and therefore, a counter literature was written to decolonize African society with created concepts about Orient (Barbarians) and women. In this regard, Achebe revisits the pre-colonial African history to deracinate the colonial misrepresentation of brown women. He focuses on the true illustration of historical African women in contrast to the colonizer's based history. Moreover, he investigates the embedded African mythology and culture in African roots to picture the Igbo fetes, veneration of their idols, local folktales and social customs.

The decolonization of the myth of repressed African culture and women become a recurrent motif in Achebe's novels. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) draws attention to one perspective of African culture where due to prevailed patriarchal society uneducated women were financially submissive to men and capitulated themselves to the notion of their survival. While in *No longer at Ease (*1960) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) the projection of women in African culture associated with certain rights and privileges are demonstrated. The very concept of myth revolves around the concept of resistance which includes human freedom, liberty, identity and individuality. The colonizers moved into new lands, with an elaborate colonial strategy and project. They made new myths by distorting the native African mythical culture to establish the domination of colonial thinking structure. This colonial thinking structure is articulated in local terms to the detriment of local cultural traditions.

After reducing Nigeria to physical occupation, the colonizer embarked upon a strategy of distorting the indigenous culture along with the historical and mythical pattern. Nigeria's native identity was thoughtfully marred and subverted through the imposition of English language and education system, 'thus [English] language and [English] literature were taking

us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds' (12). Ngugi is of the view that colonial education:

> Colonial education annihilates people's belief in their language, their environment, their heritage of struggle, their unity, and their capacities. It makes them see their past as a wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with what is furthest removed from themselves. (3)

African folktales, myths and proverbs which reflect their culture and identity were systematically erased. So, distortion of language means identity crisis and such hegemonic drive is the central target of the colonizer. Thus, the colonizer not simply colonized the land, the natives, their cultural reservoirs but also the linguistic paradigms by colonizing their history and local traditions.

> Every society establishes certain social institutions and values, which are reflective in society's religion… most of society's gods, heroes and myths, are really collective representations of the institutions and values of that society or of important parts within it. These representations determine how the individuals in the society think and act. (Durkheim 23)

It is important to comprehend some of the African religious myths to emphasize the existence of culture and folklore in African society before the advent of colonizers. Moreover, by understanding the mythology, the psychological, religious and social development of the African race with its simple and primitive culture can also be tracked down. Carolyn Dennis (1962) states:

> The majority of African people worship prominent features in nature, such as mountains, rivers and the sun. Most of these people believe that almost everything in nature contains a spirit. Some spirits are friendly and others are

not. Spirits may live in animals, plants and lifeless objects. Worshippers pray

or offer gifts to the spirits to gain their favor and obtain particular benefits

from them. (150)

Amongst the myths popular with the Igbo people, the Eri myth of origin was of great

significance. According to Ifi Amadiume (1987):

Eri the man sent down from the sky by Chukwu, the Great God finding

himself surrounded by the Anambra River, called to the Great God, who sent

down a blacksmith to produce fire and dry ground. This blacksmith became

the ancestor of the Awka Igbo and from it they inherited the secret of

smithying, in which they specialized. (28)

It is through studying history and religious symbols that one can attain knowledge of

specific layers of thinking of African society that will further help us to observe the historical

status and role of women in pre-colonial Africa. In African society the presence of a flexible

gender culture along with the pliable political system had given unprecedented status to

women. Such systems "allowed the incorporation of certain categories of women into the

male category, giving them position of authority in the power structure" (Amadiume 51).

Furthermore, "daughters were regarded as males in relation to wives. Consequently, sex in

this context, did not correspond to gender" (Amadiume 51). Interestingly, the political

administration was embedded in the religious mythical structure. It is clear from the myths of

the African people that they give greater importance to the female gender and held their

goddesses in high esteem and reverence:

The stream, Iyi Idemili, is the source of divinity. The cultural result of the

meditation of the natural (Aho, the hunter from the wild) and the supernatural

(the goddess Idemili from the sacred stream) is a hard working woman. Edo.

Thus, both Nnobi and Nnewi inherited industriousness from females; the most

highly praised person in Nnobi is a hard working woman. (Amadiume 29)

In pre-colonial Nigeria women held complementary positions to men. Their status and

rank were determined by a number of factors, the structure of the tribe and the ethnic group

she belongs to, domestically oriented chores, the range of economic activities and kinship

structure. The kinship structure made it mandatory for men to marry more women of their

own family group to produce sons. The position of a young wife improved with growing

years and she began to wield greater power and influence on other wives of her husband as

Nigerian society was a polygamous society. This also gave her the privilege to be engaged in

activities outside her household such as farming and craft making. Resultantly, she added

material sources to the prosperity of her family (Sudarkasa 103). Nigerian women in the pre-

colonial era also partook in more fruitful and profitable activities of manufacturing, trade and

political clout which enhanced their social prestige and status.

Like the social and economic structure of the Nigerian society, the religious beliefs

also bestowed upon women a high position. Carolyn Dennis (1962), while referring to

African women, states that "the religions of many Nigerian societies recognized the social

importance of women by associating them with goddess of fertility and social peace" (120).

So, African women in general and Nigerian in particular enjoyed unmatched power and

influence not only religiously but they also held influential and key status in the government

offices. They also ruled over vast territories with political expediency and iron hand by

holding powerful titles. Ifi Amadiume (1987) further states:

In Zazzau title freeholders included Sarauniya, a daughter of the king and Iya,

a wife of the king's father. In pre-jihad Nupe, there were three women's titles

which the king gave to his aunt, sister or daughter … there was also a

woman's title, Sonya, held by a commoner in Bida. She would deal with

disputes between women of common status, controlled the market and organized women's work in the fields. (110)

The Nnobi ruling system was not based on a kind of centralized political system under a king. "It had *Ekwe* titled women at each wider level of political organization who ruled over women, while *ozo* titled men with *eze,* kingly prefixed names, played the role of 'big men'. (Amadiume 55) *Ozo* titled men were prominent due to their prowess, power and riches. Nevertheless, they always held the *Ekwe* titled women in respect and never challenged their political position in the Nnobi society. Women had their own council of representation called, *Inyom Nnobi*. Women of strong character and probity were its members who could speak vehemently on female issues:

> This institution, with its own rules and regulations, dealt exclusively with matters concerning women, and the policing of Nnobi markets. Representatives to the council acted as police women in their wards, watching for offenders; when a Council was called, they judged the cases and took the decisions of the meetings back to the organizations. (66)

Many African languages surprisingly betray the absence of gender in the pronouns used by the Africans. The first names of men and women were interchangeable. Referring to this factor Niara Sudarkasa (1986) says that "many other areas of traditional culture, including personal dress and adornment, religious ceremonials, and intra gender patterns of component, suggest that Africans often de-emphasize gender in relation to seniority and other insignia of status" (150). It is evident that Africans were of the view that power should be based on superiority rather than on gender. Contrary to the unassailable Victorian gender ideology where gender corresponded to the sex, 'the flexibility of Igbo gender construction meant that gender was separate from biological sex. Daughters could become sons and consequently male. Daughters and women in general could be husbands to wives and

consequently males in relations to their wives' (Amadiume 15). Again it is discernible that "in Igbo grammatical construction of gender, a neutral particle is used in Igbo subject and object pronouns, so that no gender distinction is made in reference to males and females in writing or in speech" (17).

It was with the colonization of Nigeria in 1901 that there came a sea change in the concept of native women in the Nigerian society. The British invaded the Igbo hinterlands. And the invasion was followed by a ruthless suppression of the indigenous institutions. This was achieved by the imposition of Christianity and Western education. The introduction of a new economy system and local government administration system further damaged the structural position of women in the Nnobi society as these systems were linked with new ideologies and cultures:

> Indigenous concepts linked to flexible gender constructions in terms of access to power and authority mediated dual-sex divisions. The new western concepts introduced through colonial conquest carried strong sex and class inequalities supported by rigid gender ideology and constructions, a woman was always female regardless of her social achievements or status. (Amadiume, 119)

So, the African women were driven towards the periphery. They were ripped off from their traditional role and position and were marginalized through unjust legislation (Sudarkasa 103). Along with other notions of domination and occupation of land and the destruction of native culture, the colonizer brought new ideas regarding native women which were entirely contrary to the ones which the Nigerian society had throughout its history and culture. The colonial masters initiated the concept of European patriarchy colored by their own concept of women of the Victorian society.

Ideologically, Victorian society was divided into the public sphere and the private sphere. The public sphere was associated with masculine activity, and the idea of paid work and national politics. The private sphere, on the other hand, was primarily reserved for the female, home and family. Jane Lewis comments that "women's work is doubly gendered, first being confined to "feminine" tasks whether paid or unpaid and second being subordinate to men's work both in the home and in the workplace" (89). It was in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries that the "gender divisions were reworked and men placed firmly in the new defined public world of business, commerce and politics; women were placed in the private world of home and family" (Hall 52). In political activity of the mid-19th century the division was even more prominent and women were not allowed to participate in national political activity at all levels. Emily Davies (1860) writes that "public life is injurious to women. They are meant for the domestic" (34).

Working conditions for the women were neither friendly nor supportive. Although they were an integral part of the workforce, they were always segregated on gender issues. The Victorian labor market, in fact, was determined by a negotiated outcome between the forces of capitalism and patriarchy. Consequently, the working class women were relegated to low paid workers. Even the trade unions invariably "supported the concept of a family wage paid to men on the assumption that they alone had dependents, including a wife" (Digby 205). The Victorian women had a very limited role to play in the field of politics. Although there were some voices advocating extension of suffrage to women, yet at best they had the privilege of "participating in such local activities as voting for, or being members of School Boards or Boards of Guardians but not in activity relating to Parliament" (201).

With such fixed notions regarding Victorian women the British came to Nigeria and robbed the African women of social position, prestige and status which their society, history and mythology had given them. Ifi Amadiume (1987) says:

The post 1900 period saw the invasion of Igbo hinterland by the British. This was followed by the violent suppression of indigenous institutions, the imposition of Christianity and western education and the introduction of a new economy and local government administration through the warrant chief system. The new institutions with their linked ideologies and cultures greatly affected the structural position of women in modern Nnobi society. (119)

The destruction of the traditional social structure, therefore, reduced women under colonial rule to an inferior position and they were driven towards the periphery. Achebe challenges the colonial discourse regarding the African women by presenting Clara in *No Longer at Ease* and Beatrice in *AntHills of the Savannah*, they are based on the female archetypes available in Nigerian ancient history and folktales. Clara, in Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* is a good example of a modern African woman struggling to make her mark in the newly independent Nigeria. The novel is set in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria. Obi Okonkwo, a young educated Nigerian, attempts to negotiate with the past and the present of Nigeria in the 1950s, a time of great political upheaval and chaos. On his return from London, he gets a job on the Scholarship Board of the Civil Services in Lagos where, "if you see a white man, take off your hat for him. The only thing he cannot do is mould a human being" (12). Soon Obi finds that the Board, headed by an old colonial white man, Mr. Green, is rampant with corruption where people "work steadily to the top through bribery…." (18). Mr. Green's biases against Africa and its people are quite open "…. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him? He is…." (3). At the outset Obi shows his disgust with the very system he belongs to and resolves not to become a part of it, "The Civil Service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top" (17). Tragically he is engulfed by the corrupt society, and arrested on corruption charges, "it was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds" (5).

The novel is not only about Obi but also about Clara, a Nigerian born girl. She is a nurse by profession, broad minded and educated young girl. She falls in love with Obi but cannot marry him, "I am an *osu*" (64) a member of low caste, therefore, an outcast. Clara's position in the novel despite being a low caste is not limited or peripheral. Her story is embedded into Obi's experiences. And the strength of her character is beautifully highlighted. One can perceive self-esteem and probity in her character. She helps Obi when he was in dire need of money by loaning him fifty pounds, "But of course she was reasonably well paid and she had not studied nursing on any progressive union's scholarship. It was true that she sent money to her parents, but that was all. Even so, fifty pounds was a lot of money" (98). She refuses to be a hopeless, pathetic soul and not at all ashamed of being an *Osu.*

Achebe's presentation of Clara creates a positive impact upon the readers as she is determined and resolved to face any economic and social problems. She has the courage to make bold decisions and is ready to pay the consequences. When at a doctors' clinic for an abortion, she is asked by the doctor to marry Obi, her reply is loud and blunt, 'I don't want to marry him.' (132). Obi on the other hand, is broken by the burden of economic pressure and ultimately surrenders to it by accepting a bribe offered to him, 'The ward of notes lay where he had placed it on the rest of the day and all night. Obi placed a newspaper over it and secured the door' (153). Clara, therefore, reminds us of African women of the pre-colonial era, economically independent and brave enough to steer clear of troubled waters. Moreover, she is the harbinger of the idea of the new African women, educated, independent and self-righteous.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* Women's assertion over men is established by the fact that the narrator of the novel is Beatrice, a female character, narrating her own story with confidence and authority shaking men out of their sense of superiority. The action of the novel takes place in a fictitious locale called Kangan which understandably stands for

postcolonial Nigeria. The world of post-colonial Kangan is led and controlled by young Kangan men whose rule over the people is as ruthless as was the rule of the colonizer. The Kangan world is exclusively meant for men. Catherine Bicknell (1998) states that Beatrice is eloquent and independent woman thus representing the women's position in African society (130). Beatrice, the protagonist, is the only exception. Her parents give her another name "Nwanyibuife" meaning "A female is also something" in Igbo language. "in addition to Beatrice they had given another name at baptism, Nwanyibuife—A female is also something" (87). Beatrice is shown as a symbol of an educated African woman who can be acknowledged as a manifestation of a female's triumph. With an honor's degree in English, she is senior assistant secretary in the Ministry of Finance, who has managed to create her own space by sheer hard work and intelligence in the male chauvinistic world. She stands for a small minority of women in a world exclusively monopolized by men of unlimited ambitions. Beatrice exhibits exemplary courage in transcending the stumbling blocks to be on the crest of fame. She also proves without any doubt that she can join the ranks of the revolutionaries for change in the society.

Moreover, Beatrice transformed Ikem's concept of women. He considers women incapable of performing any role in the political set up of the society. Ikem has written 'a full-length novel and a play on the role of the women's war of 1929 which stopped the British administration in its tracks, being accused of giving no clear political role to women" (75). It is Beatrice who brings a revolutionary change in Ikem's ideas regarding women. Before that change he regarded women completely irrelevant in the political scheme of things, "with her feet completely of the ground so she will be as irrelevant to the political designs of running the world as she was in the bad old days" (100). He further admits that, "women are the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world" (135). But at the same time he is unable to define their role in the new social and political dynamics:

I can't tell you what the new role for women would be. I don't know. I should

never have presumed to know. You have to tell us. We never asked you

before. And perhaps you've never been asked; you may not have thought

about it; you may not have the answer handy. But in the case everybody had

better know who is now holding up the action (170).

So, a heavy responsibility falls upon the shoulders of women to enlighten men on the

role of women in modern Nigeria. Beatrice by virtue of her education and perception of

things is capable of performing this responsibility as she understands the fact that men and

women should work together for a better and promising future for the Nigerians. She compels

Ikem to reconsider his views by telling him that his "thoughts were unclear and reactionary

on the role of the modern women in our society" (97). She gives Ikem an insight into the

world of women which afterwards, makes him able to change his biased opinions for women

in the society. Ikem's interaction with Beatrice dawns upon him the truth that it would be

fatal and disastrous not to involve women in the nation building process. He also admits that

his vision regarding the status and role of women was flawed and a limited one and that it is

Beatrice who helped him to broaden it:

You were damn right. You charged me with assigning women the role of a

fire-brigade after the house caught fire and was virtually consumed. Your

charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression—

how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear to

succeed again and again (150).

His understanding of women's role leads him to reflect upon the idea of how to bring

a positive change in the social pattern. His newly acquired knowledge that women are not the

only persecuted group, there are peasants, the Blacks, the urban poor and the various ethnic

minorities in the world around him. They are the victims of injustice and suppression of all

kinds and since all these groups are not united in a well-knitted organization, therefore, it would be unwise to expect and hope for a revolution for the cure of human social maladies.

The questions which Beatrice has raised in the novel *Anthills of the Savannah* are of fundamental importance. They include the gender issues, women's position in the society and her position in her own house, "he was a very stern man, my father as distant from us children as from our poor mother. As I grew older I got to know that his whip was not only famous not only in our house and in the schoolhouses next door but throughout the area" (130).

Such were the conditions in which Beatrice was brought up and grew to maturity. Like her father, Ikem also had strange ideas about women. In his letter to Beatrice Ikem held women responsible for the fall of man hence their oppression is justified:

> The original oppression of Women was based on crude denigration. She caused
> the man to fall. So she became a scapegoat. Not, not a scapegoat which might
> be blameless but a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering man chose
> thereafter to heap on her. That is the woman in the book of Genesis. Out here,
> our ancestors, without the benefit of hearing about the Old Testament, made the
> very same story different only in local color. At first the sky was very close to
> the earth. But every evening woman cut off a piece of the sky to put in her soup
> pot or, as in another version, she repeatedly banged the top end of pestle
> carelessly against the sky whenever she pounded the millet or as in yet another
> rendering – so prodigiously in man's inventiveness, she wiped her kitchen
> hands on the sky's face. Whatever the detail of woman's revocation, the sky
> finally moved away in anger and God with it. (25)

While Ikem holds women responsible for all kinds of evils in the world and justified the oppression of women by referring to the Bible and the oral traditions, Achebe at once

censures all kinds of oppression inflicted on women by using creation myths. It is interesting to note that the ruling class after independence failed to come up to the expectations of the people who had high hopes to be free and to receive just and fair conditions for the promotion and prosperity of their lives. The dreams of the people were frustrated and they found themselves in fetters of exploitation, injustice and suppression. Achebe comes forward to denounce such politicians and rulers in strong terms by exposing their false thinking and philosophy of life. He brings a fundamental change towards the end of the novel when Beatrice is given the right to name Ikem's child, a right traditionally and culturally reserved and occupied by men:

> When Elewa moved up to Beatrice and whispered into her ear what she had just come to suspect as the probable reason for her mother not being there yet, Beatrice decided to perform the naming ceremony and to do it the right way. She called the little assembly to order and proceeded to improvise a ritual… 'In our traditional society,' resumed Beatrice, 'the father named the child and who should have done it today is absent … Stop that sniffing, Elewa! The man is not here although I know he is floating around us now, watching with that small boy's smile on his face. I am used to teasing him and I will tease him now. What does a man know about a child anyway that he should presume to give it a name (125).

Beatrice here is holding the central stage and calling shots. She is the symbol of Achebe's affirmation and faith in the strength and integrity of African women. She is an epitome of African women carrying a flag of women's freedom with certain rights and privileges in the pre colonial era. Furthermore, it is proved that women had an active and tremendous role in African culture and history by holding out against temptation and by declining to be demoted. Major Sam allures Beatrice to make physical relationship with him,

however, she turns down his offer at once. She rightly proves to be a role model of women's emancipation in African culture. She also reflects Achebe's embodiment of African women being capable of grabbing a strong position rather than suppressed in male patriarchy.
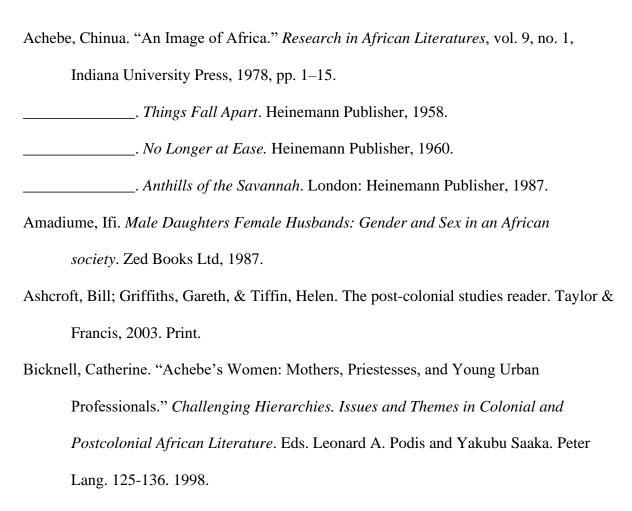
Achebe, therefore, has evolved a new system of power through a series of myths. In a way *Anthills of the Savannah* is a mythical novel, culminating with women as victor. The novel further confirms Achebe's ideas that, "as the world crashes around Man's ears, Woman in her supremacy will descend and weave the threads together" (225). Achebe, therefore, seems to link the question of the role of African women to the postcolonial situation in Nigeria. The new women in Achebe's novels stand for hope for the future of Nigeria and that their role is integral and fundamental in building up new Nigeria after the country had won its independence. Castle states in this regard:

> Until the withdrawal of colonial rule, the colonized seemed to accept that they were always the objects of someone else's story, indeed someone else's history. It was precisely the object of Achebe to resist and reject this assumption; by telling the story of the colonized, to retrieve their history. And more than that, by retrieving their history to regain their identity. (220)

So, Achebe's fictions from *No Longer at Ease* and *Anthills of the Savannah* break the stereotypical colonial discourse regarding brown women. The female characters embedded in African culture and mythologies are challenging the powerless position, suppression, victimization and ostracism of women from social and political affairs in pre pre-colonial world. In African history, the active role and status of women in socio-political fields was a significant reason for the widening and flourishing of African public affairs. It vocalizes the unheard voices and empowers them to decolonize themselves from the colonizer's biased history of Orient. In this view, therefore, a committed literature, the one that Achebe writes, is a medium to liberate women from the tyranny of a rigid colonial discourse focused on the

oppression and subordination to a repressed African patriarchy. And by doing so creates hope that if men fail to lead Nigeria to progress and prosperity, women have the potential to guide their people to a bright and prosperous future.

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