



CAN MEN SURELY BE FEMINISTS? A FEMINIST READING OF NGUGI'S *THE RIVER* *BETWEEN* AND ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

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ABSTRACT

The research sought to critique literary works written by male writers from a feminist perspective. Since the key proponents of the feminist theory are basically women, the research intended to find out if male writers can fully address the plight of women in literary works as a way of exposing the injustices that exist between the treatment of women and women in most patriarchal societies. An analysis of two works by Ngugi WA Thiongo and Chinua Achebe was done in endeavor to unearth the extent to which male writers can be feminists. It was discovered that, despite being male, these writers try to address the address the plight of women by exposing the patriarchal tendencies that exist in society and avoiding the stereotyping of women. These writers also try to provide equal opportunities for both men and women. However, it was noted that since males are not female, they fall short of the expectations of the feminist theory as they are products of a patriarchal society.

Key words: Feminism, patriarchy, feminist literary criticism, adventure

Article Info:

Article Received:15/09/2014

Revised on: 18/10/2014

Accepted on: 21/10/2014

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The oppression of women by men can be traced as far back as the biblical times where it is asserted that women should be subordinate to men. Aristotle, a well known Greek philosopher also asserted the superiority of men over women when he stated that "As between male and female, the former is by nature superior and ruler, the latter inferior and subject ...The female is female by virtue of lack of certain qualities" (Letherby 2003 :23). These views concerning women continued throughout human history and as such, the oppression of women became part of human existence. However, in the 20th century, a theory that seeks to create a society which is free of exploitation and marginalization of women was proffered. The theory is called Feminism and people who follow this ideology are feminists. The key

proponents of the Feminist theory are Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter and Kate Millet among others. Since the major proponents of the feminist theory are women, some people may think that it is an all women affair. It is, however, worth noting that some male writers have also embraced this theory and have tried to look into the plight of women through writing. This paper thus endeavors to discuss the assertion that 'Men do agree that they can never be women but surely they can be feminists.' Works by Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe would be analyzed in an effort to establish whether or not men can surely be feminists.

Literature, according to Huck, Hepler and Hickman (1989) is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. They go

on to say that the province of literature is the human condition, that is, life with all its feelings, thoughts and insights. This implies that literature reflects on the issues concerning human beings and issues to do with equality are no exception. Some writers, male or female, write to look into the plight of women as these issues are also part of the human condition.

Sex can be defined as being male or female. According to Ford (2002) sex identity as a male or female is a physically defined biological function of chemical hormones. This implies that sex is biologically determined, that is, the biological make-up of a person determines whether he is male or female. According to www.answers.com (Accessed 10/10/11) males and females differ most obviously in their unique contribution to human reproduction. It is the female who undergoes female life experiences such as ovulation, menstruation and parturition. Females alone can give birth and breastfeed. This implies that, biologically men and women can never be the same. Even those men who support the plight of women agree that they can never be women since they cannot change their biological make-up to become women. On the other hand gender is a social or societal construct. According to <http://www.crossref.it.info> (Accessed 10/10/11) gender incorporates society's interpretation of sex based characteristics and attaches a culturally constructed value to the differences and unique contributions of each sex. For example, assigning women the job of raising children after birth is a socially defined gender role. According to Greene and Kahn (1985) gender is neither a biological given nor a divine mandate, but a cultural construct and therefore a proper subject of study for any humanistic discipline. In a patriarchal culture, (a male dominated society) male characteristics are valued more highly than female qualities and femininity is marginalized (Ford, 2002). She goes on to say that gender is characterized by unequal power distributions which sometimes assign specific entitlements and responsibilities to men only. Therefore, sex is biologically determined, but gender is a psychological concept which refers to a culturally acquired sexual identity (Selden,

1989). It is the aim of Feminism to achieve gender parity or gender blindness in society.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism is a political position committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. Moi (1985) quotes de Beauvoir as saying that throughout history, women have been reduced to objects for men: 'woman' has been constructed as 'man's other'. Patriarchal ideology presents woman as immanence, man as transcendence. Feminism thus aims at defining and defending equal political, economic and social rights and equal opportunities for men and women. Thus, Feminism looks at the distribution of power between males and females, the aim being to create a gender neutral position. It is therefore premised upon the oppression of women and seeks to emancipate them from such oppression.

Although there are various shades of Feminism like American Feminism, African Feminism, French Feminism and so on, all feminists believe that the source of women's oppression is patriarchy. Ford (2002) asserts that patriarchy characterizes the pervasive control men exercise over social, economic and political power and resources throughout the world. For Kramarae and Treichler (1985) patriarchy not only refers to the preventing of women from occupying powerful positions in society but it also creates a negative social view men attach to women. Thus, the aim of Feminism is to challenge the privileged position of men and demand that women be viewed as individuals rather than simply derivatives of their relationships to men (www.answers.com, Accessed 10/10/11). As such, every writer who claims to be feminist should expose and challenge patriarchy in order to create a society which is free of oppression. This is because the oppressor is consciously endeavoring to sustain the oppression indefinitely through patriarchal ideology (Selden, 1989).

Feminists also claim that women have been stereotyped and it is their concern to expose these stereotypes as well as to do away with them. Bressler (1994) notes that, women have been stereotyped as angels, demons, saints, whores, brainless housewives or eccentric spinsters. Letherby (2003) also observes that women are

considered naturally weak and easy to exploit and as the subordinate sex, women's psychological characteristics imply subordination. Thus, women have been perceived as submissive, passive, docile, dependent, lacking initiative and so on. Feminists argue that these stereotypes should be exposed and challenged because they are evident even in the literary canon. Thus, according to feminists, women must break free from such oppression and define themselves (Bressler, 1994). Feminist critics thus argue that women can only free themselves through challenging the established literary canon that helped shape the images of female inferiority and oppression ingrained in our culture (Bressler, 1994). This therefore implies that, a feminist writer would avoid these stereotypes and elevate the position of women rather than adopting the traditional belief of depicting them as barmaids, prostitutes, old maids or whores.

The idea of subordination of women to men is another issue that feminists seek to deconstruct. According to Bressler (1994) the aim of feminists is to change the world. They want to deconstruct the belief that man is the subject, the one who defines meaning while woman is the object, having her existence defined and determined by the male (www.answers.com, Accessed 10/10/11). Therefore, feminists believe that it is their duty to expose all forms of oppression so that both sexes are valued as creative, rational beings who can contribute meaningfully to their societies and the world. Thus, a feminist writer should avoid all kinds of subordination of women to men, implying that, the female characters should be given total independence socially, economically, physically, politically and so on.

Application of the feminist theory on male writings *The River Between* by Ngugi WA Thiongo

Ngugi is a male writer who tries to address women's issues in *The River Between*. Ngugi shows from the onset that in both ridges, Kameno and Makuyu emerge powerful characters that are able to stand their ground up to the end. Whilst Waiyaki is the Kameno hero, Muthoni and Nyambura are the heroines of Makuyu. Joshua, an extremist Christian convert is oppressive to his two daughters as he forces them to abandon their tradition of

circumcision. Despite this oppression, Muthoni, the younger of the two, decides to go for circumcision. She knows very well that her father Joshua is against this but she wants to define herself as a true African woman. This is a deliberate effort by Ngugi to deconstruct the previously held belief that women cannot challenge men. Feminists according to Letherby (2003) aim at deconstructing the view that, women are not able to act and decide, to think and reason and that they are more like children than adults in that they are immature, weak and helpless. Ngugi does this deliberately to show his feminist nature because under normal circumstances in a patriarchal society very few or no girl children can challenge their fathers like Muthoni does. Another way in which Ngugi shows that he is a feminist is by depicting Muthoni as a courageous woman who, despite the fact that her circumcision is not successful, never regrets her decision. This is meant to deconstruct the view that women are generally weak and cannot endure pain. Eagleton (1983) thus asserts that, feminists have reacted bitterly to the view of women as passive, narcissistic and masochistic. This is exactly what Ngugi does in the character Muthoni.

Nyambura is also a character that Ngugi develops to be a heroine. Nyambura visits Muthoni in Kameno where she had gone for circumcision and this is without her father's approval. The rebellion and subsequent death of Muthoni sees Joshua disowning her and both Nyambura and her mother Miriam are not allowed to attend Muthoni's burial. Here, Ngugi is exposing patriarchy which is the major concern of Feminism. He goes on to challenge patriarchy by developing in Nyambura the courage to go against her father's firm hand and even falling in love with his enemy, Waiyaki. In *The River Between*, Ngugi shows his feminist nature by exposing and fighting patriarchy and elevates both Muthoni and Nyambura as true heroines as they fight for their rights in order to define who they are and to defy male classification of the female as 'the other'. To this extent, Ngugi can be asserted as a feminist as he fights for the emancipation of women through the characters of Muthoni and Nyambura. However, some critics have argued that Ngugi fails to be surely a feminist as the heroic status of

Nyambura is determined largely by her love for Waiyaki. It may seem that Ngugi is suggesting that Nyambura's personality or behavior is largely because she has an inevitable penis envy (Bennet and Royle, 1995). This is the stereotyping of women which true feminist deny claiming that their personality develop independent of men and their fight against patriarchy is a genuine cause for their total emancipation. Also, the fact that both Nyambura and Waiyaki emerge as heroine and hero respectively shows that Ngugi seems to be suggesting that females cannot be heroines in the absence of men. If one compares Ngugi's Nyambura in *The River Between* and Martha in Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps*, one would notice that Martha fights oppression and even goes to the extent of killing Freddy so as to totally do away with patriarchy unlike Nyambura who only fights her father's patriarchal practices for the love of Waiyaki. Also, the death of Muthoni seems to suggest that those women who try to be independent will never succeed. Thus, Ngugi, as much as he is a feminist, we cannot assert him as surely one as he falls short of some of the expectations of the Feminist theory, that is, asserting women's elevation without the influence of men.

***Anthills of the Savannah* by Chinua Achebe**

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is another exceptional work of art that tries to elevate women. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice is endowed with the brains and beauty that makes her an admirable character for many. Achebe creates a Beatrice who has a first class Honors degree from Queen Mary College University of London. Thus, Achebe does not stereotype Beatrice as a brainless housewife as most patriarchal societies do. Robyn (1983) believes that attention to gender stereotypes is another issue in which feminist criticism can usually be identified as the stereotypical way of persecuting female characters. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe elevates Beatrice to an educated female character. Beatrice is also articulate, independent and she re-evaluates women's position (Bicknell, 1998). Beatrice herself asserts that "It is not enough that women should be the court of the last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late (p 91-2). Thus, Achebe strives to

affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women (<http://inforplease.com> Accessed on 10/10/11). Achebe also makes his newly envisioned female roles to be expounded, articulated and secured by the woman herself, in the character of Beatrice. For example, Ikem tells Beatrice, "I can't tell you what the new roles will be. I don't know. I should never presume to know. You have to tell us" (p. 98). Achebe also empowers Beatrice by letting her give Elewa's baby a name. Culturally, this was meant to be done by men. This shows that Achebe to a larger extent is a feminist in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

It should also be noted that Achebe moves from the peripheral role of women in his earlier novels to playing a central role in shaping and mediating the realms of power in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Beatrice rises to the position of secretary which was not common for women in her society. Thus, Fochingong (2006) observes that the portrayal of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of changing the course of female emancipation. Thus, African women are playing active roles in their nations' histories by resisting being pushed or tempted into accepting subservient or degrading or decorative roles. Thus, it can be confirmed that Achebe is to a greater extent a feminist.

Although it can be appreciated that in *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe reflects sensitivity to women's issues by moving his female characters from being voiceless to voice, it can also be observed that there are some elements of Feminism that he fails to fully address. For example, Beatrice is well educated with an Honors degree and she is the only person with such kind of a qualification in her community. To show that man cannot surely be feminists, Achebe makes her a mere secretary, only to take a leading position after Sam, Ikem and Chris' deaths This may suggest that Achebe is saying that as long as men are there women cannot occupy those top positions. Also, the naming ceremony of Elewa's child reflects some deliberate attempts by Achebe to show that patriarchy as a system can never be destroyed because Beatrice gives Elewa's girl child a male name. These facts are an indication that a lot still has to be done for men to be surely feminists. Thus,

since the male writers who try to be feminists are products of patriarchal societies, it may be difficult for them to do away with all aspects of patriarchy in literary works. Odetola (1983) contends that, in most African societies the personality of the individual is significantly interwoven with cultural factors from birth to death and as such, the individual cannot escape the impact of his or her cultural experiences. This implies that the process of socialization may be a hindering factor for those male writers who are trying to add their voices to the fight for the emancipation of women from the yoke of patriarchy through literary works.

CONCLUSION

To sum up the foregoing discussion, it is worth noting that men do agree that they can never be women as their biological make-up cannot be changed. They will remain men but as far as Feminism is concerned, they can make an impact by fighting the oppression of women through writing. Male writers like Ngugi and Achebe among others have embraced the feminist theory and have tried to expose and challenge patriarchy by elevating women to influential positions at the same time trying to do away with the gender stereotyping of women. Their efforts can be appreciated because they are products of patriarchal societies. Thus, to a greater extent men can be feminists as evidenced by the discussions raised in this paper. Male writers should, however, work extra hard to totally emancipate women so that they can surely become feminists and not semi- feminists who on one side act as if they are elevating women but at the same time failing to totally empower them.

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