

UNDERSTANDING GENDER DISCOURSE IN AFRICA THROUGH AFRICAN LITERATURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION

MSC Okolo
Philosophy Leadership Studies Unit,
Institute of Communication and General Studies,
Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria
E-mail: mscokolo@gmail.com ; Phone number: +234 7038401594

Abstract

*In Africa today, a critical discussion of gender is essential because many of the fundamental issues which affect African societies arise out of the dissonance and mishandling of gender issues. This is because gender is a nodal point bringing together all aspects of human relations and social interactions ranging from family arrangement to ideas and values endorsed by society, political participation, and economic involvement. This means that the mishandling of gender issues bears serious implications for the health of Africa and as such focus must be on addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It is for this reason that philosophy and literature are employed as methodological tools. The activities of people in literature provide examples of a wide range of issues that deepen understanding as well as capture the root causes and broader consequences of unequal arrangement in gender relationships. This study attempts to integrate an analysis of gender discourse with an exploration of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* so as to probe the many dimensions of gender issues. The importance of a philosophical reflection is to extract the ideas pertaining to gender contained in the literary texts under review and subject them to a rigorous analysis so as to find out their suitability or otherwise for the ordering of an equitable gendered society. The study concludes that proper handling of gender concerns can become the access through which Africa can utilise its full human potential.*

Keywords: Gender, African Literature, Philosophy, Africa

Introduction: Africa

The fundamental issues which affect African societies today, ranging from nation-building, resource control, power, to notions of inequality, development and even post-colonial domination are in one way or the other connected with gender – how it is interpreted, its nuances, practices, implications, dimensions, persistence, relevance and outcomes. This is because gender is a nodal point bringing together all aspects of human relations and social interactions. The fact of being female or male as embodied in gender

has long been discovered to be responsible for the different ways women and men are treated in society. Indeed, the UN Women (2018) underscored gender equality as the primary goal that undergirds all the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals adopted by world leaders in 2015 as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This implies that gender is central in the determination of progress in all human activities. Gregory Ogbenika (2022:144) insists that every 'human society is a composite whole that comprises the male and the female gender. Therefore, for progress to be all-encompassing, the economic, socio-cultural and political landscape must bridge the gender gap.' Also, in Fantu Cheru's (2008:8) view 'Africa's development has been held back by the lack of significant progress in promoting *gender equity*.' Africa's destiny, then, is critically tied to how gender issues are (mis)handled.

The continuous interest in gender discourse indicates that gender concerns with its penetrating focus on matters of equality, inclusiveness, cooperation, teamwork, equity, justice remain an important concern for Africans and Africa. Here it is helpful to ask what are the causes of female marginalisation in their homes and society? What exactly are the hurdles preventing women from participating in decision making? Do men fare better at asserting their authority in their homes and society and in participating in decision making because they are men? The novels under review help to interrogate these issues. They also help to point to the danger that some of the issues causing gender discrimination if not properly investigated could potentially create other forms of discrimination in male-female relationship.

Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*

Wizard centres on the Ruler of a fictional African state, Aburiria. Like God, who he sees as his equal, he is the Almighty, the alpha and omega to his subjects. Fittingly the birthday gifts his ministers proposed to give him on behalf of the nation is a project named Marching to Heaven. This will put the Ruler on the same pedestal with God so that they have face-to-face contact. Unlike God, his power does not encompass mercy, kindness, benevolence, justice, righteousness and, especially, love. He imprisons his wife in a house with a stone wall and an electric fence for having the effrontery to question how he conducts his extra-marital affairs, especially, with young school girls. His ministers cower before him to the point of offering their wives, girlfriends and, even, daughters to appease him whenever they commit any real or imagined infraction. The entire Aburiria is his own and 'his every moment- eating, shitting, sneezing, or blowing his nose- captured on camera' (3). Even his yawns can be the cause of slaughtering whole villages. Here is a Ruler who is insatiable in the accumulation of raw power and sees it as the epitome of achievement and its display the only worthy way to demonstrate it.

The mortality of man, however, will always mock all his claims to supernatural attributes. Kamiti, an unemployed graduate, through series of misunderstandings becomes the Wizard of the Crow, from which the book takes its title. His meeting with Nyawira, the leader of the Movement for the Voice of the people, helped them to form an alliance that threatens the authoritarian regime of the Ruler and his cohorts.

Wizard draws attention to the role social relations play in gender related issues. Inclusion in power game can act as both the means for elevation and degradation depending on the disposition of the power broker. For a power-seeking agent like the Ruler, anyone who poses a threat to him is subordinated irrespective of gender. Whereas, for a power-chosen individual like Kamiti, anyone who partners with him for the development and wellbeing of others is both an equal and someone he can learn from. Gender, thus, can be neutralised by power depending on how power is conceptualised and utilised.

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

Anthills unfolds against the incursion of the military into politics in Africa that characterised African political climate of the 1980s. His Excellency, Sam, has just assumed power in a fictional African state, Kangan, following a military coup that ousted a corrupt and incompetent civilian administration. Without political education and any preparation for political leadership, he turns the power vested in his office to an absolute and a personal power to wield as his mood dictates. His cabinet members became his 'yes men' and state affairs his personal matters. Ikem, the editor of the *National Gazette* and his childhood friend, is cold-bloodedly murdered for trying to point His Excellency in the right direction through his editorials. But before his death, Ikem creates awareness on the need for women to define their new role in the society. Beatrice through whom this message is passed takes charge of rebuilding the lives of those around her at the time the story ends. Importantly *Anthills* suggests that a robust gender discourse must recognise and incorporate the multi-stranded nature of gender. All voices are important and should contribute. The voices of literate male and female, the voices of male and female students and the voices of non-literate male and female artisans, who have been almost entirely excluded from political debate must be included and heard.

In all, *Anthills* calls for a more nuanced and inclusive gender agenda. In this, women have a decisive role to play in dismantling gender discrimination as part of established culture. The success of this however will depend on both literate and non-literate men and women working together as collaborators.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's *Purple* centres on the family of Eugene, the deranged Christian zealot, whose education, intellect and humanity are swallowed up by his confused theological understanding of who God is and what He represents. This fatal flaw sets the agenda for all the issues in his interaction with his family especially in the way gender roles are interpreted and unreflectively accepted. Beatrice, his wife, and his children, Jaja and Kambili, are force-fed Eugene's view of the world. In her fear Beatrice failed to notice when hatred eroded her fear. From a timid subservient wife, Beatrice turns into a cold-blooded murderer who can eliminate the object of her many years of adoration through systematically poisoning his tea and watching him every day in the calm assurance that very soon one of these days will be his last. There is no compunction; only the patience of a

vulture waiting for a victim to expire. Her attempt to effect change albeit successful on the physical plane, Eugene dies, fails abysmally on the psychological plane where, in fact, it matters most. She fails as an instrument of challenge and change for her children. Kambili is horrified by her action of eliminating Eugene by poisoning his tea which acts as a bond of their family life. Jaja no longer needs her intervention for he has learnt to stand up to Eugene. All together her big action came too late for even her own redemption. Her achievement becomes her battered and broken self. She becomes unkempt; a woman who only speaks through nods and shakes of the head. Beatrice succeeds only in bringing a distorted new level of thinking that neither deepens her children's zeal to fight Eugene's tyranny nor positions her as a heroic woman who has overcome oppression. What Adichie succeeds in showing is how delicate gender issues are, especially, as they relate to family life which is at the heart of all gender concerns. Drawing on a long series of sorry experiences Beatrice suffered in the hands of Eugene; it is safe to conclude that sustainable gender relationship must flow from domestic knowledge about what works and what doesn't.

Interpreting Gender Relations in Africa based on the Novels

The variety of aspects raised and presented by the authors illustrates the diversity of thought and the many ways gender issues can be apprehended. The novels provide both new insights and new ways of interpreting old notions of gender relations in Africa. These will be discussed under six points.

The first is the notion that views gender as a metaphor for inequality and discrimination directed at women. The novels demonstrate that such rigid stance can distort and undermine the issues driving gender relations. Gender discrimination, for instance, is not an exclusive preserve of women. The discrimination Papa-Nnukwu and other traditional worshippers suffered in *Purple* in the hands of Eugene is on account of religion. Due to difference in their religious belief, Eugene not only does not visit his father, Papa-Nnukwu but bans him and all other traditional worshippers from setting foot in his house. Despite all his wealth and generosity (he is 'Omelora' to his people – The One Who Does for the Community p.64), his father lives in near penury but for Aunty Ifeoma's care. In *Wizard* any person who is perceived remotely as a threat to the Ruler is fed to the Crocodiles of the Red River. Equally in *Anthills* any real or imagined enemy of His Excellency is eliminated. In both cases what drives gender relations is not male-female consideration but power exercised as coercion or in Phillips Shively's (1997:6) view power exercised as 'construction of incentives.' According to Shively exercising power as the 'construction of incentives' leaves people with no other acceptable choice but to obey because the alternative is so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains. Here far from women being the sole object of inequality and discrimination, the only type of people who survive are those ready to accept any indignity to be on the right side of power. When Dr. Yunique Immaculate Mgenzi renounced her 'revolutionary foolishness, repented, and pledged faithful service' to the Ruler, he appoints her information officer and the deputy ambassador in Washington (21). Equally, Dr. Luminous Karamu-Mbuya-Ituika is

appointed the Ruler's 'official biographer' after he repented of his radical views against the Ruler.

The novels, then, demonstrate that the male-female opposition usually associated with gender analysis hinders more than it helps. This is not to say that there are no stereotypes associated with men and women and that those stereotypes do not have any effect in reproducing inequalities. However, by focusing on women as sole objects of discrimination places an unnecessary limitation on the proper understanding of gender. Instead of deepening appreciation on how men and women stand in relationship with each other emphasis is diverted to women as necessary victim to their male counterpart. Once a woman accepts this victim mentality she gives up on exploring possibilities that can give her the opportunities she needs. Adichie's Beatrice is a typical example of a woman content to wallow in her victim position. Even though educated, she convinces herself that her entire existence has meaning only through her role as a wife. Unfortunately, Eugene does not know how to be a husband, and even a human being. By sticking to stereotype, Beatrice ignores all the signs that she is married to a deranged Christian. It will take almost two decades of brutalisation to convince her that the man she holds up as the sole meaning of her life will kill her and her children without meaning to. So finally, she poisons Eugene, still believing herself his victim. Yet Eugene has been her victim all along. By docilely accepting his unnatural anger and beating for so long she robbed him of the opportunity of redemption. Instead of standing up to him as an appropriate adult response to such situation, she preferred to hide under a stereotype that is not even culturally animated. There is no cultural backing for serial domestic violence. Gender relationship suffers when men and women, especially women, fail to properly interpret what is appropriate behaviour and attitude for them in line with social and cultural expectations.

Second, the person one gets advice from in handling gender issues is very critical. In *Purple* Beatrice rejects Aunty Ifeoma's advice to leave Eugene and yet when Beatrice could no longer bear his brutality, she turned to her house help, Sisi. Sisi helped her to procure poison from her uncle who is a powerful witch doctor. It is this that Beatrice put in Eugene's tea until he died. Given Sisi's background and level of exposure she is not able to advice Beatrice on other alternatives to pursue. In buying into Beatrice' tortured mind, Sisi instead of helping her succeeds in compounding her problems. Far from the liberation she seeks, she is smothered by a more strangulating existence: a loss of self and a gulf between her and her children. Jaja is separated from her through physical distance caused by his imprisonment. While Kambili by mental distance caused by her doubt of Beatrice' mental health. On the other hand, Vinjina's request to the Wizard for a poison to kill her husband was rejected. Nyawira in the guise of the Wizard first of all made her to realise that she is the principal cause of her problem by accepting her husband's brutality and living with it for so long. Rather than thinking of eliminating her husband, she should make up her mind to deal with the real source of the problem. This is for her to resolve never to be beaten again. Without this confidence, women in abusive relationship will continue to subject themselves to any condition. The important point here is to be careful who one chooses as

an adviser when one is facing a difficult situation. Granted, that Vinjina is not aware of the identity of the Wizard, Nyawira's education, experience and exposure proved vital in her handling of the situation. Equally Auntie Ifeoma, a university lecturer, provided Beatrice with a better alternative to her problem which she unfortunately rejected. What this implies is that gender issues demand careful handling and should be referred to more informed people.

Third, is the influence of personality in defining and determining gender relation. That is, the personality of the man and woman involved is very cardinal in defining gender relation. In *Anthills* even though the last girl from an all-female home, Beatrice made up her mind early that she would not allow herself to become a victim of gender discrimination. For this, she took her studies seriously and was determined to put her career first and, if need be, last. This secured her a relationship on basis of equality, cooperation and respect with her fiancé, Christopher Oriko, the Commissioner for Information and even the editor of the *National Gazette*, Ikem Osodi, who believes that girls do not have enough brains. Indeed, the novel places her on equal pedestal with them in giving the account of political events in the fictional country, Kangan. She, in fact, survives them and becomes the rallying point for both the down trodden and those desiring for a better political arrangement in the state. All these are possible because of her perception of herself and her doggedness to achieve independence for herself. In contrast, Beatrice in *Purple* defines womanhood in terms of her functions as a housewife and mother and ties even the attainment of her full character and the fulfilment of her happiness to them. For her notions of womanhood, marriage and submissiveness (even in a domestic violent situation) are so interwoven as to be interchangeable. These are what constitute the essence of life for a woman, a husband for her 'crowns a woman's life' (83). It is this timidity that ultimately became her undoing. Governed by fear of not having a life without a husband, she submitted to Eugene's brutality until she became almost a deranged woman whose eyes could glaze over things without seeing them. On the other hand, Nyawira in *Wizard* believes that her relationship with a man should be based on mutual respect earned through hard work. For this, she shuns her father's riches to marry a man who she hopes to achieve self-reliance with. Unfortunately, Kaniuru turns out to be a gold-digger interested more in her father's money than in his marriage to her. Rather than subject herself to a miserable marriage, she walks out. In doing this a whole new world opens to her. The time she spends listening to Kaniuru's useless verbal attacks is replaced with meaningful activities directed at addressing the social ills in her country. It is in this pursuit that she met and earned the love and respect of Kamiti, the Wizard of the Crow. Nyawira's action demonstrates, at least, three critical points. One, women should be prepared to pay the necessary price to achieve their aim. Two, for a sustainable gender arrangement, there is need for both men and women to be conscious of what they are bringing to the table and what they should accept and what to reject. Three, that the analysis of gender differences that focus on women as disadvantaged and weaker in political, social, educational, economic, legal, and physical issues fail to interrogate their full potential as socio-political actors.

Fourth, the novels point to the need to promote a gender wholesome understanding where biological differences are not made the focus in gender relationship. The novels portray that there are other concerns rather than biological differences driving gender relationship. Eugene's choking hold on his wife which at first glance may appear to be as a result of his seeing himself as the man of the house has in reality nothing to do with it. Rather, the script Eugene is acting is strictly written and directed by 'the good father' who soaked his hands in boiled water because he sinned against his body (203). This irrational acceptance of what constitutes sin, punishment, awe of the white man and unquestioning adherence to the Christian faith are what propel Eugene's action. It is his misguided choice of an inhuman reverend father as his model for Christian expression that sets him on a pedestal far removed from his wife. From this high throne, clothed in robe of righteousness he metes out punishment to save his family from eternal damnation. It is this that destroys any basis for equality. It is difficult for a self-justified person to condescend to an ordinary level where he begins to rub shoulders with his inferiors. A reflection on some of the issues raised by Kisiang'ani (2004:22) is a good way to round up this point. He questions:

Should biological differences between the African woman and man binarise the continent into a protracted gender conflict? Is being a biological woman enough for the female gender to unreasonably identify with women even when those women are engaged in dangerous activities? Conversely, is being a biological man the only criterion for a male gender to identify with men even when those men are trumpeting unproductive male chauvinism?

Fifth, the novels show that access to education is vital in addressing gender inequality. In *Anthills* and *Wizard* Beatrice and Nyawira's access to education proved very useful in the way they handle gender issues. They see their education as a useful tool to secure their independence, fight for the right of the marginalised, especially women, and contribute to the re-ordering of their societies. In *Anthills*, Beatrice' house became a safe haven for women like Elewa at the height of the political crisis in Kangan. She became a rallying political point for the marginalised in their effort to survive the country's political upheaval and contribute to the building of a better society. She made them aware that 'this world belongs to the people of the world not, to any little caucus, no matter how talented (232)'. In so doing she sowed the seed of political consciousness that transcended gender discrimination and point to the right of both men and women to be incorporated in finding sustainable solution to their collective problems. Equally Nyawira's education provided her with the tool to understand the political issues at stake in Aburiria and the proper response to them. She sees this in organising the people, particularly the women, to fight for their right. She knows that rough weather does not choose men over women and that the sun does not beat on men, leaving women nice and cool (83). The essence of education for her is to use it as a vehicle to interrogate social ills in the society, especially gender-based inequalities and educate the disadvantaged and mobilise them to participate in political activities to bring about desired social order. Jejeebhoy in NailaKabeer (2006:29) indeed notes that there 'is considerable evidence for the claim that access to education can bring about changes in cognitive ability, which is essential to women's capacity to question, to

reflect on, and to act on the conditions of their lives and to gain access to knowledge, information, and new ideas that will help them to do so.' This view, however, needs some qualification. Kabeer (2006:31) draws attention to the need for caution in assuming that the effects of education can be taken for granted or that they will be uniform across all contexts. This is because the 'hidden curriculum' of 'school practice reinforces messages about girls' inferior status on a daily basis and provides them with a negative learning experience, thus creating a culture of low self-esteem and low aspirations.' He insists that the hidden content of the educational curriculum mirrors and legitimises wider social inequalities by denigrating physical labour and domestic activities which is largely the preserve of women. As such he maintains that gender 'stereotyping in the curriculum portrays girls as passive, modest, and shy, while boys are seen as assertive, brave, and ambitious. This reinforces traditional gender roles in society, and acts to limit the kinds of futures that girls are able to imagine for themselves' (pp.30-31). This may account for the servile attitude of Beatrice in *Purple* who despite her education believes that a woman's life amounts to nothing without a man to take care of her. Here too, agency is very important. The way a woman perceives herself, what she can do like in the case of Nyawira will go a long way in correcting this.

Sixth, the novels demonstrate that gender issues cannot be settled through a prescribed formula. All the three novels portray gender issues as more dynamic and complex than the traditional approach to it. In *Anthills* Beatrice's non-conformist attitude to the laydown behaviour expected of women proved vital in finding new ways to respond to the socio-political crisis in Kangan. She recognises that 'giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough...' (91). In a private dinner given by His Excellency, when she realised that one of the guests, an American girl, was not showing His Excellency any respect, she rose to the occasion. She secured His Excellency's attention, took him to the balcony and posed this question: 'If I went to America today, to Washington DC, would I, could I, walk into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of CIA?' (81). For this, she was dismissed from the party. This did not deter her from 'taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces' (82) of the tragic history of Kangan as she could lay her hands on in an effort to chart a new course for the country. In *Purple* Eugene's supposition that as a man he will always call the shots in his house proved very fatal in the end. His self-justified attitude made it impossible for him to consider his wife as an equal or, at least, someone he can have a measure of shared interaction with. This complete subordination and disdain for cooperation instead of keeping his wife in the perpetual servile attitude he imagined he has achieved proved to be his undoing. Beatrice poisons him without the slightest remorse. In *Wizard* Tajirika's belief that it is his prerogative to beat his wife as tradition prescribes is shattered when he is kidnapped and subjected to the same treatment by a new order of justice created by woman. In spite of his shock and shame at what happened to him, self-preservation compelled him to seek for a gender arrangement with his wife based on mutual understanding.

Conclusion

This study sets out to show that the application of philosophy to African literature is critical for a proper understanding of gender discourse in Africa. Activities of people in literature provide examples of a wide range of issues that both broaden and deepen understanding of the varied perspectives of gender discourse in Africa. Specifically, the study integrated an analysis of gender discourse with an exploration of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow* to interrogate the many varieties of gender issues. The purpose is to show how this articulation of gender discourse opens an interior, expansive, flexible and critical space in which different strands and controversial gender issues can be explored and negotiated. The novels depict that to achieve the goal of gender equality family interactions and social arrangements must move beyond societal response and focus instead on addressing the root causes of gender inequality. In all, the novels help to show that proper handling of gender concerns can become the access through which Africa can utilise its full human potential.

References

- Achebe, Chinua. (1987). *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. (2006). *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Cheru, Fantu. (2008). Africa's development in the 21st Century: Reshaping the research agenda. *Current African Issues*. No.41. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Kabeer, Naila. (2006). Gender equality and women's empowerment: a critical analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal. *Gender and Development: Sampler*. UK: Routledge and Oxfam, pp. 25-39.
- Kisiang'ani, Edward Namisiko Waswa. (2004). Decolonising Gender Studies in Africa. *African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms*. Dakar: CODESRIA, pp.9-26.
- Ngugiwa Thiong'o. (2007). *Wizard of the Crow*. Lagos: Farafina.
- Ogbenika, Gregory Ebalu. (2022). Gender Discourse and National Development in Nigeria. *Agora: A Journal of Philosophical and Theological Studies*. Vol.3. Nigeria: St. Albert the Great Major Seminary, pp.139-156.
- Shively, Phillips W. (1997). *Power and Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*, (5th edn). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- UN Women. (2018). Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Retrieved from <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/2/gender-equality-in-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development-2018>.