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Reverential Feminism: (Re) Considering the Status of Women in the African Novel

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In assessing the African novel from a twenty-first century Western perspective, the tendency inevitably arises to interpret the culture as inherently bearing an excessive force of patriarchal subjugation against which all African women must struggle. Perhaps such a reading is not entirely unwarranted, but if this is the chosen lens for interpretation, it then becomes necessary to distinguish the author's beliefs from those represented in the cultural attitudes of their text. In failing to make this ideological distinction between the world of the novel and the world of the novelist, it becomes easy to err in the way of too readily assuming that the literary treatment of culture and tradition in Africa must necessarily promote an anti-feminist agenda, when actually the opposite may be more accurate. This matter of anti-feminist sentiment in the African novel has been a source of great contention and heavily leveled critique for Chinua Achebe in his landmark novel *Things Fall Apart*. Such harsh critique seems to offer a shallow reading of only the explicit narrative action, neglecting the feminine triumph that arises when the text is observed in appreciation of its more meaningful, though perhaps understated, implications. This same issue of a somewhat concealed feminist perspective, which might require greater consideration than readers are perhaps willing to offer, can rather easily become an interpretative issue for Ngugi Thiong'o's complex tale of Kenya's struggle for independence, *A Grain of Wheat*, where so much of the novel's meaning is imbedded deeply within and spread throughout the narrative. But understanding this characteristic feminine reverence in the African novel is not always so difficult to realize as it is in the case of Achebe and Thiong'o, for in more recent works by a growing body of female African novelists, like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, we can observe a refreshingly unequivocal veneration of feminist perspectives that have long been victimized by the traditional patriarchy. Those feminisms can come across unsurprisingly suppressed in male-dominated traditional cultural narratives like *Things Fall Apart* and *A Grain of Wheat*. In the case of each of these novels, however, female characters are ultimately held in the author's highest regard, and though it might not always be so readily observable, the feminine perspective of each work surfaces by the end with unquestionable reverence, even in spite of the inescapably anti-feminist force of African patriarchal tradition and the phallogocentric cultural institutions therein that all African women must at some point face.

On a surface understanding of feminine perspectives in *Things Fall Apart*, it is not difficult to see how the events of the novel could potentially

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mislead one to the erroneous conclusion that Achebe has presented a narrative whose aim is ultimately anti-feminist. Despite the gendered second-class status of women in Achebe's treatment of Igbo culture, we would be remiss to conclude that Achebe is supportive of the extent to which his protagonist serves the narrative with such violent feminine repression—we must not, as readers, make the mistake of equating Okonkwo's regard for feminine perspectives with Achebe's. Rather than with Okonkwo, Achebe's narrative alliance is with Igbo society, so it is therefore crucial to understand that not only is Okonkwo at odds with Achebe in his treatment of women, but also with the very social foundations of his own beloved traditional culture. Concerning this issue of Achebe's feminine presentations, critic Chijioke Uwasomba notably indicates:

Achebe does not portray women in a patronizing manner but clearly depicts the reality of the African society which recognizes the patriarchal and matricentric units of the society. Anyone who understands the Igbo philosophy and the nuances of *Things Fall Apart* will realise that Achebe demonstrates convincingly that women are considered very important in the affairs of the society he portrays in spite of the patriarchal subjection of women by the like of Okonkwo. (25)

Inspecting the text with particular attention to its female characters should allow readers to see that Uwasomba is quite on the mark in her understanding of Achebe's honest social awareness. And far from unimportant, this issue of feminine perspective is central to a sound critical understanding of the novel.

Though it is Okonkwo's refusal to accept and understand the colonial intrusion that takes over in Part Two and drives the immediate narrative action which results in the tragedy of his death, the seed of his downfall is sown much earlier through his nearly lifelong intolerance for all things feminine. This intolerance existed pervasively as a narrow-minded projection of his personal insecurities upon the entirety of his cultural interaction and social aspirations in Umuofia. In fear of inheriting the emasculated characteristics which he sees defining his father, Okonkwo conditions himself from childhood to irreverently despise all things feminine, allowing himself in turn to subconsciously hate and seek dominance over women: "Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title" (13). In an essay on the West African female poet Nana Asma'u, Chukwuma Azuonye references this childhood episode in a brief tangential consideration of feminine centrality in *Things Fall Apart*: "Why does the hero Okonkwo fail in the end? He fails because of his complete misunderstanding of the gender balance in his own

culture... Acting on his superficial and literal understanding that femininity or feminine things can be equated with failure, because of the application of the odium agbala to his failed, ne'er-do-well father..." (65).

There is a moment in Chapter Five that can perhaps pass with unrecognized significance when Okonkwo's core repressed desire for feminine domination is subtly, yet definitively, revealed. It is at this moment that the author's voice brilliantly matches up with his protagonist in order to provide wonderfully illuminating subtextual implication that reveals Okonkwo's culturally antithetical and ultimately devastating desire for gendered dominance: "[Okonkwo] trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman." (42). With these unassuming lines, it is conveyed that Okonkwo's desire for women is in essence simply a desire to conquer and subdue—woman and conquer become synonymous within the realm of his desires. Therefore, even prior to the missionaries' arrival and the disastrous colonial struggle that ensues in Part Two, we can see that Okonkwo has already triggered the onset of his downfall and sealed the fate of his solitary demise by situating himself in opposition to his own culture through disregarding its requisite feminine concern.

Okonkwo's hand in the slaying of Ikemefuna, and more specifically his attitude in the aftermath, can demonstrate more concretely the way in which his tragedy is sourced as much from his prolonged anti-feminist cultural transgression as it is from the impending colonial intrusion. In the wake of his role in Ikemefuna's death, despite Obierika's warning against it, Okonkwo finds a voice of regret and empathetic disappointment in this sage friend whose advice he could not heed: "What you have done will not please the Earth." When Okonkwo replies, "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," (67) we can see the extent to which he feels superior and impervious to the power of even the most fundamental feminine cultural forces. In his deep fear of femininity and the overcompensated masculinity with which he masks it, Okonkwo is willing to disregard even the most sacred cultural energies, assuming of course that they are feminine energies, and feels delusionally safe in his manliness from the danger of upsetting female deities. Through his masculine arrogance in this sequence of events, it is clear that Okonkwo has irrevocably and unforgivably transgressed against the God most central to the culture which he lives his life to epitomize: "Ani [the Earth goddess] played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (36).

It is in observation and preparation for The Feast of the New Yam in Chapter Five that we first see Okonkwo physically combating feminine influence through his unwarranted beating of Ekwefi. This violent domestic dispute—

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which escalates with seemingly irrational intensity before ending with Okonkwo turning a gun on Ekwefi and firing a stray bullet—is again demonstrative of Okonkwo’s need to conquer and subdue anything even remotely feminine in his life. Moreover, in addition to the basic understanding of this act as a clear manifestation of Okonkwo’s immense fear and insecurity in facing the feminine, his prejudiced quest for a dangerously unchecked sort of masculine dominance can be seen here existing as not only a literal attack on Ekwefi, but also as yet another declaration against the Earth goddess Ani of his utter refusal to respect and acknowledge the status and authority of feminine perspectives within Igbo culture—even when those perspectives belong to deities. Indeed, we begin to understand this action as unquestionably motivated by his contempt for the feminine when we recall that this action is taking place amidst preparations for a sacred day designated for the worship of Ani in praise of all her feminine earthly offerings and blessings in relation to the life and prosperity of traditional Igbo culture. But Okonkwo will not join in the jovial celebratory atmosphere, for it is celebrating the female, and we see the directly precipitous correlation between the chapter’s violence and his mounting attitude in both the days preceding the festivities, as well as in the precise moments preceding the attack:

But somehow Okonkwo never could become as enthusiastic over feasts as most people. He was a good eater and he could drink one or two fairly big gourds of palm wine. But he always got uncomfortable sitting around for days waiting on a feast or getting over it. He would be very much happier working on his farm... The festival was now only three days away... And then the storm burst. Okonkwo, who has been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly found an outlet. (39)

Due to the novel’s masculine narrative-absorption guided by Achebe’s central interest in Okonkwo’s tragedy, some feminist readers might find it disappointing to realize that the key female perspectives are afforded relatively minor overall consideration. Despite the domineering narrative effect of Okonkwo’s overwhelming masculine perspective, it is nonetheless necessary to consider the novel’s feminine perspectives, suppressed though they may be. Specifically, we would be doing a significant disservice to a feminist reading of the text if we were not at the very least attendant to Achebe’s treatment of Okonkwo’s wife Ekwefi, as she provides an avenue by which Achebe’s feminist agenda is taken beyond the dominant narrative warning against the danger of Okonkwo’s phallogocentric mindset, allowing readers to see more clearly the feminine veneration that the novel intends.

From the moment she is introduced in the previously discussed scene as Okonkwo’s domestic abuse victim, Ekwefi establishes herself through an act of defiance as a force triumphantly feminine and unwilling to comply with her

husband's weak-minded authoritarian masculinity. In the moments following the violence, Okonkwo (who is apparently far from a skilled marksman) decides to go hunting. "And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot" (38-39). In a remarkable display of courage that could have come from none of his wives but Ekwefi, we see a female force standing up to deride Okonkwo in full awareness of his patriarchal authority, challenging his oppressive masculinity complex. We can also see the non-traditional feminist force of Ekwefi in the story of her escape from marriage in favor of a new life with Okonkwo. In a way that other women in the novel are not, Ekwefi is able to confront and defy the injustices that she feels result from her status as a female in an unquestionably male-dominated cultural and domestic world.

A final noteworthy act in which Ekwefi exercises her feminine will in open defiance of culturally prescribed gender boundaries and patriarchal subservience is her tracking of Chielo on the night that the priestess comes to take Ezinma and deliver her in darkness to the goddess Agbala. Understanding the power of her feminist convictions, and that he could not dissuade her even if he liked, Okonkwo does not even slightly object to her pursuit. Actually quite the contrary, in an anomalous moment of feminist sympathy, Okonkwo allows his wife to follow their daughter and transgress culture freely—he even helps her. In an odd subconscious form of something akin to gender reversal, Okonkwo serves on this particular night as a sort of help mate for Ekwefi, following her with enough distance to allow for the charge of her independent feminine movement, yet close enough to offer his help should she need it. In this fleeting moment Okonkwo seems to have somehow shed his domineering masculinity and aligned himself with the novel's esteemed feminine perspective. But unfortunately, and perhaps unsurprisingly, this is the only time he demonstrates this capacity for feminine sympathy—it is indeed his high point in the novel.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o presents in *A Grain of Wheat* a multitude of plot lines woven into a single overarching narrative thread of Kenya's struggle for independence. As a result of this multifaceted exploded narrative, however, the feminine perspective and Ngugi's treatment thereof can become perhaps a touch difficult to pinpoint. Therefore, in order to more readily observe the novel's feminine agenda, it is helpful to narrow our consideration of events and follow the action of singular characters and relationships rather than the action of the narrative more comprehensively. Along these lines, we can perhaps best illuminate Ngugi's regard for the feminine perspective by looking in depth at Mumbi with close consideration of her relationships with men and interactions with the force of masculinity in the text.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, as Mumbi emerges the narrative champion,

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we can ultimately come to see Ngugi bestowing tremendous admiration upon the feminine perspective that he has cultivated through the line of Mumbi's character development. In the essay "Changes in the Image of the African Woman: A Celebration," Ebele Eko suggests that Mumbi is indicative of a more general trend: "One sees a definite attempt, on the part of some male writers, at taking their female characters more seriously, investing them with more humanity and dignity by allowing them to grow through experiences that demand choices, that challenge them and reveal their strengths and weaknesses realistically" (212). And Ngugi certainly does all these things for Mumbi as he increasingly comes toward the full exposure and endorsement of Mumbi's fundamental feminist qualities.

In beginning our evaluation of Ngugi's feminist discourse through Mumbi, it is crucial to revisit her initial characterization: "Her dark eyes had a dreamy look that longed for something the village could not give. She lay in the sun and ardently yearned for a life in which love and heroism, suffering, and martyrdom were possible" (75). The irony in these lines is that Ngugi proceeds unquestionably to grant his beloved heroine each of these things for which she yearns, contrary to the narrative implication that "the village could not give" such things.

With regard to Ngugi's depiction of Mumbi's as an admired feminist force, analyzing her relationship with men in the novel becomes immensely helpful. Again through her initial characterization in Chapter Seven, we come to learn that not only is Mumbi beautiful, but she also has maintained a sense of her feminine autonomy and independence apart from the masculine force that remains culturally embedded in spite of colonialism's marginalization of a more traditionally patriarchal Africa. Uninhibited by patriarchal influence, Mumbi is presented as a woman whose decisions are based on her own feminine desires rather than on the outside imposition and pressure of some masculine force. Guided entirely by her own perspective, Mumbi is free from masculine pressure and patriarchal social apprehension, and thus has no issue declining the marriage proposal of a leading clergyman's son (75).

The love triangle that emerges with Gikonyo and Karanja provides much of Mumbi's feminine characterization. As the tension between these two suitors mounts, Gikonyo is presented as possessing consuming admiration of woman in pursuit of Mumbi's love, while Karanja offers only masculine nonchalance with an implicit sense of patriarchal entitlement—it is not unsurprising, then, that Mumbi chooses Gikonyo. Indeed, it is Gikonyo's admiration for the force of femininity that sets him ahead of Karanja in Mumbi's eyes. It is also his feminine reverence for not only Mumbi, but also for his mother, that provides his life's last hope upon his dismissal after six years of detention camp: "Bare, disillusioned in his hope for early Independence, he

clung to Mumbi and Wangari as the only unchanging reality...His reunion with Mumbi could see the birth of a new Kenya” (102-103). Upon his arrival, however, all his hopes and feminine exaltations are vanquished at the sight of a child conceived by Mumbi and Karanja. In anger and humiliation, he sheds his favor toward the feminine and adopts the furrowed brow of a decidedly coldhearted masculinity. He even goes so far as to physically punish Mumbi, before coming back around and racing once more for her honor in the novel’s climax, and extending himself to her in the final moments of the novel in full admission of the atrocity of his actions.

Mumbi’s relationship with Mugo also warrants consideration in attempting to understand what Ngugi might be implying in regards to the novel’s treatment of the feminine perspective. It is to Mugo that Mumbi conveys at length the tale of her time without Gikonyo and how she came to sleep with Karanja. Though she quite honorably never once refuses blame in the telling of her story, what ultimately unfolds with honest humility is a tale in which she becomes the victim of calculated manipulation at the hands of Karanja, in the service of a colonial patriarchy that is in every way her antithesis. She recounts the climactic event’s aftermath: “When I woke and realized fully what had happened, I became cold, the whole body. Karanja tried to say nice things to me, but I could see that he was laughing at me with triumph” (146). Though here she can only sense her exploitation implicitly through Karanja’s demeanor, the full extent to which it actually existed is revealed in the novel’s climax in the narrative of the second race:

When Gikonyo was taken to detention, Karanja suddenly knew he would never let himself be taken away from Mumbi. He sold the Movement and Oath secrets, the price of remaining near Mumbi... But Mumbi, his Mumbi, would not yield, and he could never bring himself to force her. Ironically, as he thought later, as he thought now, she only lay under him when he stood in the brink of defeat. He had felt a momentary pang of intense victory which, seconds later, after he fact, melted into utter isolation and humiliation. He had taken advantage of her. (205)

The story has a critical impact on Mugo, who is harboring a tale of his own in which he is the guilty party who must answer the novel’s pervasive question concerning Kihika’s betrayal. It is indeed the profound emotional effect of Mumbi’s story that sparks change in Mugo, and leads him ultimately to convey the truth of his own story: “He could not escape from his knowledge of Gikonyo and Mumbi’s lives...Yesterday, this morning, before Mumbi told her story, the huts had run by him, and never sang a thing of the past. Now they were different...How was it that Mumbi’s story had cracked open his dulled inside and released imprisoned thoughts and feelings?” (167). It is made quite

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clear in the moment of Mugo's admission that it has everything to do with Mumbi, for it is her face and her honesty that haunts and compels him to publicly account in the end for his treasonous actions. But even before the very end, we can see that Mumbi at least is aware of her force as a woman as it relates to Mugo: "She held him balanced at her finger-tips, and suddenly knew her power over him. She would not let him go" (178). Thus, the novel's feminine influence becomes more and more evident as we begin to see Mumbi becoming empowered so triumphantly through the tremendous amount of reverence with which Ngugi invests his feminist perspective.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* differs from the previously considered works of Achebe and Ngugi in that its feminine perspective from the very opening line explicitly confronts the cultural dominance of masculine voices that work openly to subjugate women under the pretense of patriarchal tradition. With this evocative opening remark, "I was not sorry when my brother died" (1), we are introduced to Tambudzai, and it is not long into her story before we realize that, for more reasons than one, there is quite plainly nothing to dispute in her detached reaction to Nhamo's passing. Given its first-person narration, we must understand in a very literal way that this narrative belongs to Tambu—it is her story and she is the one telling it. What we receive is a compelling tale of what it means to be a woman in Africa. For Tambu, and by extension for African women more generally in the novel, the gendered injustice to which she is subject is something that she learns early in life through her brother's insensitive enjoyment of luxuries and opportunities that are afforded him as a male within the traditional African patriarchy. The novel then emerges as an individual feminist manifesto of sorts, providing Tambu the platform to display the absurd injustice mounted against African women by a long-standing tyrannical patriarchy.

As a child, Tambu must struggle against her culture in order to educate herself in hopes of defining her existence as something more than a domestic servant simply at the disposal of patriarchal tradition. We can understand early on exactly the sort of forcibly masculinist mentality that she is up against, as her father so derisively comments: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15). Seemingly against all odds, however, and without any family support, Tambu perseveres with regard to continuing her education through feminist determination and an unwavering refusal to fall victim to tradition in the way of her mother. It is by virtue of this very feminist determination, the personal drive which has alone been responsible for her continued schooling, that we can empathize with her indifferent response to her brother's death—better to remain indifferent than to outwardly rejoice. And rejoice would not be completely unmerited, for only in Nhamo's death is she afforded a spot in the

mission school which allows her to finally escape the cultural insularity which especially stifles any woman like Tambu with sustained hopes of bettering herself through education.

In addition to Tambu, the novel offers another distinct feminist voice in Nyasha, who is subject to a dual victimization—not only is she marginalized by her femininity in the realm of her father’s traditional patriarchal dominance, but she has also been indoctrinated from birth into an oppressive system of colonial authority by virtue of her parents’ education and status. In maintaining adherence to traditional custom through a mindset deferential to his agrarian African heritage while living a life of imperial opulence through his success in the developing colonial world, Babamukuru has structured his family’s domesticity in a manner rife with devastatingly consequential contradictions. The effect of this household, caused by the coexistence of such antithetical cultural perspectives, is suffered most gravely by Nyasha, whose sense of identity has been so problematically developed that she is in a sense without cultural identity altogether. Nyasha feels the effect of these two forces that seek to dominate her, and this psychological burden manifests itself in her physicality when she develops an eating disorder. Her personality is ripped in so many different oppressive directions, for so many different oppressive agendas, that her psychological and physical health never stand much of a chance—such conflict was bound to take its toll eventually. By means of their shared feminist perspective, Tambu links herself to Nyasha’s pain on the night of the dance when Nyasha arrives home late after being with a young boy and is met with a ruthless beating at the hands of her father:

...and I feeling bad for her and thinking how dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredome, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I felt victimized at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them... But what I didn’t like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness. (118)

On the alternate routes upon which Tambu and Nyasha situate themselves by the novel’s end, there is perhaps cause for concern in the fact that these cousins will be without the solidarity of their feminist bond, left ill-equipped in facing the world’s winds of feminine social alienation and patriarchal oppression. Others have also considered the potentials of this hypothetical post-textual concern, as in the essay “Fighting the Good Fight: What Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* Says about Language and

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Power,” wherein Gillian Gorle asserts on the basis of a similar postulation: “Tambu’s plight is the least desperate at the end of the story, containing at least some measure of hope. By contrast, her anglicized cousin Nyasha, in hospital with acute anorexia nervosa, may not survive” (181).

What becomes fundamentally clear in each of these novels is that they are in unanimous agreement concerning their support of feminine perspectives. Though there are scarcely grounds on which to contend this feminist backing in Dangarembga’s case, it is noteworthy to see how a female African novelist might go about treatment of the subject in comparison to the men who have dominated the country’s literary landscape before her. Dangarembga’s explicit feminist agenda in *Nervous Conditions* operates nicely alongside *Things Fall Apart* and *A Grain of Wheat* to offer Ngugi and Achebe’s more subliminal feminist agendas a source of illumination by contrast. When given due consideration, it becomes clear that Achebe fully endorses feminine perspectives in *Things Fall Apart*—a fact that has been too readily overlooked on the superficial grounds of the novel’s surface action. While perhaps not the victim of such severe feminist critique as *Things Fall Apart*, *A Grain of Wheat* suffers likewise from a sort of understated feminism that might be overlooked in the face of Ngugi’s male-dominated narrative if we are not mindful to accord the novel’s female characters with appropriately weighted consideration. In any case, what we should ultimately avoid is the tendency to too readily condemn a work on the grounds of anti-feminist subject matter, or to conclude that any male-dominated narrative must by converse extension be an anti-feminist narrative. For as we see in the case of Achebe and Ngugi, this is not always true—far from it, in fact, and sometimes we may only need the contrasting aid of a female African novelist to see the feminism that can often be subdued in the cultural narratives of her male literary counterparts.

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