

September 2009

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Recommended Citation

Nwagbara, Uzoechi (2009). Changing the Canon: Chinua Achebe's Women, the Public Sphere and the Politics of Inclusion. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), 175-190.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol11/iss2/11>

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Changing the Canon: Chinua Achebe's Women, the Public Sphere and the Politics of Inclusion

By Uzoechi Nwagbara¹

Abstract

This paper examines the subjugation of Nigerian women with regard to how their political marginalisation constricts the public sphere, the resource centre of public opinion, which strengthens the ideals of democracy and good governance. The political marginalisation of women in Nigeria is a rectilinear upshot of their low participation in government and politics necessitated by patriarchy. This patriarchal practice has animated the urgency of expanded public sphere as well as feminism, an ideological, aesthetic and cultural movement, steeped in agitating for the rights of women and expanding the frontiers of their participation in the political process. In the political novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, which is to be considered in this paper, Chinua Achebe has deftly refracted the rise of new Nigerian women, who are generation changers. Beatrice represents Achebe's new women; her portraiture in the novel interrogates postcolonial Nigerian politics of disempowerment, marginalisation, shrunken public sphere and gendered space that occlude good governance.

Keywords: Nigerian politics, women in public sphere, Habermas, Chinua Achebe

Introduction

“The dichotomy between the private and the public sphere is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about.”

--- Carole Pateman, *Public and Private in Social Life*, 1980.

A major motif of postcolonial Nigerian state is the exploitation and marginalisation of women in politics. This system is sustained by the logic of patriarchy, male chauvinism, and gendered political mechanics, which undermine democratisation as well as undercut the expansion of the public sphere, a discursive space for democracy and good governance. In apprehending how the public sphere is narrowed in postcolonial Nigeria, it is crucial to understand the level of access women have in political participation. Political participation is an integral facet of the public sphere, a space for the institutionalisation of alternative views and discourses needed for inclusive politics. It is in this space that women, who are the bulk of the subaltern, in the Spivakean parlance, articulate “their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life” (Tripp 2000: 27). In ensuring this, literature is cardinal in the process of

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deconstructing, rewriting, and reconstructing the political history of Nigerian women. This is so because Nigerian literature mediates between a “bewildering amalgam of socio-political contingencies and economic realities” (Kehinde 2008: 333) that beleaguers Nigeria and the search for an alternative order.

The dimension of power dissonance within Nigeria’s socio-political and cultural turf following sexist political paradigm has left a balance sheet of androgynous lore and order, decline in the true worth of women and their indigenous institutions, marginalisation, underdevelopment, and shrunken public sphere. The contention put forward by Kunle Ajayi in his piece “Gender Self-Endangering: The Sexist Issue in Nigerian Politics”, underpins sexist politics in Nigeria:

The Nigerian women have, since independence, been denied opportunities of assuming political leadership at all levels of governance in the nation’s federal set-up. (2007:137)

As a result, feminist writing is informed by the need to break the patriarchal mould which contrives discriminatory political roles to Nigerian women by assigning negative stereotypes to them by men in order to hijack the public sphere. This is so because patriarchy shrinks the confines of the public sphere. Literature is therefore essential in reconfiguring Nigeria’s political process; hence, “... there is a direct relationship between literature and social institutions. The principal function of literature is to criticise these institutions and eventually bring about desirable changes in the society” (Maduka 1981:11).

Within this rubric, Nigerian feminist writing considers literature as being central to the history of discourse and debates on womanhood and feminism (Marks and Courtivron 1989: 39; Decker 2004: 108). Nigerian feminist writers therefore see art (literature) as a role-reversing narrative, essentially contrived to deflect stereotypes, misrepresentation, and skewed knowledge about the true worth of women, particularly in politics. In this light, the significance of early feminist writers in Nigeria is a canonical revolution to transcend the tradition that shores up the rhetoric of female oppression and inhumanity. This attempt has paid off: it has widened the public sphere as well as deconstructed discourses in Nigerian literature, politics and philosophical thought. Thus,

The early novels of Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (1966) and Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizens* (1975) and *The Bride Price* (1976) are replete with stories of the Subjugation of women and their maltreatment ... These Novels placed women in conflict of sorts and showed how they resolved their various dilemma.

(Chukwuma 2007:135)

In women’s struggle for self-fulfilment, Nigerian writers (feminists) have reconfigured womanhood, prioritising female individualism and empowerment – thereby subverting the seeming powerlessness of women to political authority. By extrapolation, they have upturned the saliency of women transformation of the public sphere through literary production that engages with this reality. The diachronic transformation of Achebe’s women, from victims of a society regulated by patriarchal cultural norms and values (Fonchingong 2006: 137) to independent, political conscious and self-assertive women - as we see in *Beatrice*, instantiates Achebe’s political and literary commitment to use

women empowerment as a conduit for the expansion of the public sphere for inclusive governance.

Following in the footsteps of early feminist writers in Nigeria, Chinua Achebe has engaged with Nigeria's *modus operandi* of governance as well as the expansion of its public sphere for the consolidation of democratic ideals through feminist aesthetics. Achebe's aesthetic preoccupation with the expansion of the public sphere and good governance finds resonance in the craft of *Anthills of the Savannah*, where he modifies his previous idea of women – thereby seeing them as political actors and people with a voice capable of changing gender relations through participation in the business of the public sphere.

As far as gender is concerned, Achebe's use of Beatrice and her role in the novel to ingratiate himself with leftist feminists is quite transparent, and the measure of his success is feminists' frequent citation of *Anthills of the Savannah* as a work informed by a progressive attitude towards gender relations, in contrast to his earlier works which they see as suffused with patriarchal subjugation of women.

(Owomoyela 2002: 4)

In connection with the above, the sinew of Achebe's paradigmatic shift is moored in feminising his aesthetics for democratised public sphere and the formation of a modern "counterpublic", which will vouchsafe participatory democracy and good governance. Achebe's aesthetic preoccupation dovetails with Ania Loomba's in her *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, where she argues that postcolonial women's position in the postcolonial experience is an unbroken imaginings of the disparate levels and paradigms of liberation; a method of "re-writing indigenous history, appropriating postcolonial symbols and mythologies, and amplifying where possible, the voice of women" (2005: 191).

For Achebe, liberating Nigerian women from "the peripheral, tangential role of passive victim of masculine-based cultural universe" (Mezu 1994:27-28), is a function of literature, hence, "Literary works serve as a means by which the predicaments of women ... can be represented and condemned" (Kehinde 2006: 170) thereby calling for change. Put simply, the production of Achebean feminist narrative resonates with interrogating Nigeria's overarching, patriarchal dominance of women in politics, which negates the expansion of the public sphere. By allowing women's voice to be heard in the deafening clatter of male universe (the public sphere) Achebe has redefined the very language of their identity and political participation.

Theoretical Clarification

The theoretical framework of this study is predicated upon Nancy Fraser's revisionist study of Jurgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere, a realm "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (Habermas 1991: 176). Jurgen Habermas's seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962) has attracted widespread attention in recent debates concerning the interface between the public and the private spheres. In the line of thought of the cultural theorist, Habermas, the book questions the status of public opinion in the exercise of representative democracy and governance. Although, originally used to gauge the

heartbeat of broadened public opinion as it affected the public sphere in Western Europe, the concept, the public sphere, has been appropriated by societies the world over how to deal with their disparate situations regarding expanding debates that bring about democratic changes. For Hauser, the public sphere is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgement” (1999:117). In the thinking of Nancy Fraser, it is basically “a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state” (1990: 57). In addition, Asen in his “Toward a Normative Conception of Difference in Public Deliberation”, considers it as “a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed” (1999: 125). Through the book, Habermas made an inroad into the belt of historical-sociological exploration of the making, efflorescence and demise of the “bourgeois public sphere” – his term, which was seen in the past as being based on rational-critical debate, and was in effect imaginary and exclusive of the masses (especially the women) in political participation.

In furtherance of this, in *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, Fraser offers some illuminating revisionism of Habermas’ historico-sociological description of the public sphere. The corollary of Fraser’s critique of Habermas’ public sphere is: the public sphere was originally tainted with exclusivity and hegemony, given the Habermasian canon. In contrast to Habermas’ contention on disregard of “status altogether” (1991: 36) and exclusivity, Fraser has argued that the bourgeois public sphere discriminated against the women and those at the lower rung of the socio-economic and political ladder. The exclusion of the marginalised (women) from the universal public sphere gave rise to Fraser’s “subaltern counterpublic” or “counterpublics”. The revisionist approach Nancy Fraser proffers resonates with feminist aesthetics and discourses, which stand as “counterpublic” to popular public debates and discourses (Benhabib 1992:89) that limit political participation of women, especially in Nigeria, where they are the worst hit. The silent feministic revolution enacted by Achebe’s women is a systematic advancement of democratic project in Nigeria, where the masses, especially women are politically imperilled:

If women, who constitute at least 50% of the total population, should bear any burden, it can only be reasonably expected that the rest of the society will have to either directly or indirectly bear part of the burden.

(Olayinka 2006: iv)

Feminist ideologues and thinkers, particularly Carole Pateman, claim that the revisionist approach enunciated by Nancy Fraser enhances women’s appropriation of the hegemonic power structure, which was *prima facie* patriarchal – thereby limiting their level of political participation because it is a system from the fraternal brothers (Caha 2005: 10).

Against this backdrop, feminist thinkers and writers have couched their writing in ideo-aesthetic credo that haul salvos against the hegemonic imperatives ushered in by patriarchy – by breaking the barriers between the private and public spheres, which is arguably the groundwork of modern political thought and practice. Nigerian feminist writing, which includes Chinua Achebe’s later novels, is modelled upon literary works and ideas that emphasise the need for women to challenge the limitations posed by public-private dichotomy, insisting that it is largely a patriarchal, chauvinistic culture. Therefore, such literature in the thinking of Achebe should accentuate

Parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and articulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

(Fraser 1990: 67)

Interestingly, one of the integral “discursive arenas” of the Fraserian “subaltern counterpublic” is literature; it is an institution that could be used to challenge stereotyped beliefs and system.

Iconoclasts of Phallogocentric Walls: Chinua Achebe’s Women and Change

In feminist aesthetics, literature could be used to subvert phallogocentric views of women as inferior and apolitical; it could also be used to interrogate anti-public-sphere mode of governance – as seen in *Anthills of the Savannah*, where Achebe pillories the authoritarian regime of Sam (His Excellency), the despot of Kangan. Kangan is an imaginary militarised West African state a – simulacrum of Nigeria. Beatrice’s remark about Sam’s detachment from the masses as a result of shrunken public sphere, illustrates the abysmal hiatus between the masses and the powers that be; it also eviscerates the malaise made of the Nigerian polity through impervious political leadership:

In the early days of his coming to power I had gone fairly often to the Palace with Chris and sometimes Chris and Ikem. But then things had changed quite dramatically after about one year and now apart from viewing him virtually every night on television news I had not actually set eyes on him nor had any kind of direct contact for well over a year.

(70-71)

It could be gleaned *a priori* from the above excerpt that Sam loathes oppositional views and “counterpublic”, to borrow Fraser’s term. Sam’s statement shows his unwillingness to engage with the masses whose interests do no matter in the political and decision-making process of Kangan. It is against Nigeria’s oppressive political arrangement in which the women are the most hit that Achebe’s women seek to change the political landscape of their world.

In appropriating “the will to change” (Mezu 1994: 217) the patriarchal, political landscape of Nigeria, Achebe’s women have continued to demonstrate this penchant by becoming increasingly aware of their political rights as illustrated in Achebe’s later works since the publication of his artistic primer, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). A perfunctory reading of Achebe’s women in his earlier fiction paints a picture of a diachronic development. Such reading, starting from his debut novel, *Things Fall Apart* to the last one, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), essentialises his commitment to incorporate the female principle – thereby invoking his ideological and artistic commitment to contribute to wider debate about bettering the leadership miasma of postcolonial Nigeria, and Africa by extension. This approach is in tandem with Ngugi’s position that “every literature is a commitment to a specific political ideology, and every writer is a writer in politics” (Ngugi 1981: xii). The portraiture of women in *Things Fall Apart*, gauges the heartbeat of a nation embroiled in machismo politics and sexist culture:

It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders.

(85)

In his sophomore novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1963), Achebe offers a modification of his female characters, which culminates in Clara, Obi Okonkwo's fiancée, who is seen as being self-assertive and daring. Unlike the image of women relayed in *Things Fall Apart* - who are docile and submissive and unthinking, Clara gets an abortion following Obi Okonkwo's refusal to marry her. Although she fades away in the novel, but Achebe presents to us the image of a changing group, who had been at the lower rung of the societal ladder. In his third novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe refracts a more commendable characterisation of women. In the novel, we see Chief Nanga's wife, who is disenchanted with her husband's extramarital activities, especially regarding his intending marriage to Edna.

However, Achebe's paradigm shift in his refraction of womanhood culminates in the creation of Beatrice, one of the protagonists of *Anthills of the Savannah* - the true spirit and heart of the novel - and a quintessence of Achebe's radical thinking on the political roles of women in postcolonial Nigeria (Africa). She is the blood, mind and voice of Achebe's new women (Owusu 1991: 468). The portraiture of Beatrice finds expression in Achebe's preoccupation with creating new women, who will be part of Africa's (Nigeria's) transformation process.

Achebe's new women are in contradiction with the fabled good women, who were being kept

in reserve until the ultimate crisis arrives and the waist is broken and hung over the fire, and the palm bears the fruit at the tail of its leaf. Then as the world crashes around Man's ears, woman in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards.

(98)

In addition, Achebe's new women challenge the rationale behind public-private dichotomy - a phallogocentric wall, which impinges on their contribution to politics and the public sphere, "an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction" (Fraser 1992: 110). Beatrice's stance on the political architectonics of Kangan, where *Anthills of the Savannah* is set, is crucial in understanding women empowerment through the expansion of the public sphere. For Beatrice, in order to overturn public-private dichotomy thesis for more inclusive politics, the Kangan (Nigerian) women should resist "being pushed or tempted into accepting subservient or degrading or decorative roles" (Evans 1987: 134) in politics. Therefore, women in her view should be active participants in the drama of political and social change. It is only through women's active political participation and representation that the public sphere could be widened for policies that could help galvanise sustainable democratic culture and good governance. Although in the fictive realm, through the political pragmatism of Beatrice, "Achebe believes that the time is now, for the new nation of Africa, to invoke the female principle" (Ojinmah 1990: 103), which ultimately challenges public-private dichotomy by considering every individual as a part of the public and a partaker in economic, social, and political actions (Sen 1999: 19).

Achebe's new women negate the Negritudinal space that made them court of last resort (92): their voices were never heard unless all alternatives had been explored; hence, the Negritudinal universe sustained patriarchal regimens and was moored to men's world. The voice that echoes in such gendered, asphyxiating landscape calibrates phallic tyranny and shrunken public sphere. It is to this end that Achebe reasons that the political failure of postcolonial Nigeria is largely lack of expansion of the Habermasian public space – by not incorporating the views of the politically marooned. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe traces the malaise of the nation as well as the contracted public sphere to “the failure of our rulers to establish vital links with the poor and the dispossessed of the country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being” (141). In putting the Kangan social space in context, it is appreciable that the Kangan women are walled off from the political apparatus in His Excellency's government. In circumventing the patriarchal universe that impinges on women's rise from private to public sphere, Beatrice says,

But the way I see it is that giving women the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!

(91-92)

Thus, as long as politics does not consider everybody's opinion in shaping public policies and governance, Beatrice argues that the human society will be continually embroiled in “failed” mode of governance and inept political leadership.

Furthermore, Achebe's new women contain that the interface between the private and the public sphere should be taken as a nexus for critical inquiry and contestation in the overall struggle for women empowerment, particularly in politics. Thus, they argue that while the democratisation project in Nigeria emphasises participatory governance as well as widened public space for democratic deliberation, it remains to be seen if these are not mere sloganeering; hence, women are not adequately represented in the public space. The lopsided Nigerian political structure that relegates women to the background is a case in point, even as Nigeria preaches sustainable democracy after almost five decades of her political independence. The ratio of men to women as regards political representation in Nigeria is abysmally low; this logically impacts on the inclusive nature of her democracy. As Edward Said contends in his *Beginnings: Intentions and Method*, “You have to step outside the novel, the play, for the larger truth” (1975: 25). Literature aside, the larger truth that Said's statement adumbrates is the postcolonial Nigerian state, which is replete with horrid tales of politics of disempowerment, especially the women in the wake of sexist politics and “patriarchal superintendence that suffocates the women out of any meaningful existence” (Nyamndi 2004: 220).

However, Achebe sees the new women symbolised by Beatrice turning

What were formerly perceived as the private troubles of women into public issues. They have shown how women's personal troubles in the private sphere are in fact issues constituted by the gender inequality of the social structure.
(Oyewumi 2002: 2)

Beatrice's musing here prefigures Nigeria's sexist politics and leadership failure, which needs to be overturned:

For weeks and months after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin. Anything I tried to put down sounded wrong – either too abrupt, too indelicate or too obvious – to my middle ear.
(82)

In changing the bitter history of women – which Achebe calls “tragic history” through Beatrice, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese in her essay “Placing Women's History in History”, reasons that feminist consciousness places women at the centre of history by recognising their peculiar role in the structuring of history and political process (1982: 29). This attempt is what Beatrice sees as “pulling up one of those spears thrust into the ground by the men in their hour of defeat and left there in the circle of their last dance” (83).

The inability of the political elite to incorporate feminist principle in their political thought and practice is largely part of the *raison d'être* for shrunken public sphere and “failed state” status of most African nations, especially Nigeria. In congruence with this line of thought, Beatrice reasons that for her to chart a new course for the political roles of women in Kangan politics, she has to address it from a chauvinistic point of view, hence, patriarchy is a system fashioned out of a grand design to trample on women. We see this in her opinion of Ikem's political idea about women:

I pointed this out to him jokingly as a sure sign of his chauvinism... In the last couple of years we have argued a lot about what I have called the chink in his armoury of brilliant and original ideas. I tell him he has no clear role for women in his political thinking.
(91)

For Beatrice, the new women should take political participation as a chauvinistic activity through which their maligned essence in the society could be overturned.

Even though the whole actions in the last chapter of *Anthills of the Savannah* adumbrate the denouement of the plot – which is largely the rise of Achebe's new (real) women, the christening of Elewa's daughter, AMAECHINA: *May-the-path-never-close* by Beatrice is the culmination of this fact:

Beatrice had decided on a sudden inspiration to hold a naming ceremony in her flat for Elewa's baby-girl. She did not intend a traditional ceremony. Indeed except in the name only she did not intend ceremony of any kind.
(217)

The context of the above snippet dovetails with the rise of the “subaltern”; it also provides an alternative perspective in the novel, which is arguably anchored in Achebe’s incorporation of feminist philosophy in resolving the political crises in Nigeria. The significance of the above expression inheres in what Onyemaechi Udumukwu calls “double reversal” (2007b: 323) of history: first, a boy’s name is given to a girl; second, the ceremony is performed by a woman – a grand sacrilege in the portraiture of Achebe’s earlier women. In fleshing out the subtext of this ceremony, Udumukwu argues that

By presiding over the naming ceremony Beatrice breaks protocol. This is because she performs a role that is traditionally preserved for a male who is also an elder.
(323b)

It is therefore important to note here that the ceremony is a clarion call for the democratisation of Nigeria’s public space, which finds expression in transformed public sphere. Beatrice’s response, “All of us” (225) to the question why she had to name the baby ensconces Achebe’s ideo-aesthetic commitment to use women empowerment to highlight the need for expanded public sphere and participatory government in postcolonial Nigeria. The trope of “all of us” throws up picturesquely women’s involvement and importance in the political process.

Toward a Transformed Public Sphere: Beatrice as Achebe’s Prototype Woman for Expanded Public Sphere and Good Governance

Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, is a postcolonial novel set in Kangan, where Sam, the military Head of State, has come to power via coup d’état and “without any preparation for political leadership” (12). The public sphere of Kangan is enmeshed in “dilemmatic space”, no communication between the state and the masses. In this space, the political class has brazenly embarked on the “privatisation of the public sphere”, to allude Claude Ake’s famous words. The intensely stratified social hierarchy in Kangan’s socio-political space following Sam’s power drunkenness constitutes conflicts and tension in the polity. To this end, the masses are not heard regarding how to move Kangan forward politically. The socio-political imbalance created by this form of class attrition shrinks the public sphere and reverberates with Achebe’s meditation on the matter with Nigeria: “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of (political) leadership” (1980: 1), my parenthesis. In the words of Emmanuel Ngara, Kangan’s political and socio-economic milieu has rendered the downtrodden “either pushed to periphery or relegated to oblivion” (1990: 122) thereby shrinking the Habermasian public sphere that rather resounds with the incorporation of the people’s view in the political process.

The story of *Anthills of the Savannah* is principally relayed by three people: Beatrice, Ikem and Chris. The novel refracts military dictatorship and usurpation of power by the political class to the detriment of the masses in Kangan (fictionalised Nigerian state). In his *Chinua Achebe: New Perspectives*, Umelo Ojinmah says that in the novel

Achebe presents various perspectives on the problems of contemporary African nations, represented by Kangan, through the multiple narrative voices fluctuating between the first-person point of view (Chris and Ikem), and the third-person limited point of view.

(85)

In the universe of this novel, the Head of State, Sam (His Excellency) is an absolute ruler, who is completely averse to constructive criticism, wholesome dialogue and public opinion for democratic governance. Sam's apathy to public opinion, a correlate of public sphere, is atrophied in the cosmos of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. The shrunken public sphere in the novel – made possible by lack of communication and dialogue between the people and the state is painted in a bold relief in this brusque statement by Sam in the first page of the novel: "I will not go to Abazon. Finish! *Kabisa!* Any other business?" (1). Sam's statement negates the ideals of Fraserian "counterpublic" thesis, hence, he does not want to listen the opinion of the people of Abazon province, a place made comatose by drought. Therefore, Sam's statement also challenges such notions as ethical conduct, tolerance for opposition and the use of power for the benefit of all in society (Ojinmah 1991: 61).

Moreover, another illustration of Kangan's shrunken public sphere finds expression in the nature of the editorialising that Ikem Osodi, the editor of *The Gazette*, the state controlled newspaper, does. In order to reduce the level of the people's participation in the political process, Sam, the "President-for-life", censors the contents of the paper through Chris Oriko, the commissioner for information – making sure that alternative vies and opinions are stifled. In this space, the views of the people, especially intellectuals, who are supposed to lead the way, are made prostrate via the draconian regime of Sam. However, in the narrative, Achebe's depiction of Beatrice shows that she is created to symbolise the proverbial anthill that survives to tell the tale of the drought. The drought here is emblematic of His Excellency's dictatorship. Achebe's artistic predilection is couched in the way Beatrice questions the validity of Kangan government, which she sees as discriminatory of alternative views and people's political preferences.

In her illuminating book, *World, Class, Women*, Robin Goodman states:

It is possible still to identify survival itself with the future of the public sphere and, as women are the hardest hit by such structural adjustment policies, to identify the future of the public sphere itself as dependent upon the direction of feminism.

(2004:5)

In this context, Goodman's statement is understood to mean that the expansion or transformation of the public sphere as well as the future of the marginalised in the political arrangement is essentially reliant on feminism. The statement above foregrounds the Habermasian rider that takes into account the structural modification of the public sphere, a development from the bourgeois public sphere, which reinforces the normative universalising of patriarchy to "differentiated", marginal public sphere, created by feminist discourse and aesthetics.

Feminism is steeped in the termination of the dichotomy between the private and public spheres that it considers the foundation of contemporary political thought. Hence,

The separation of the public and private has perceived public life to be identical with “men” and private life with “women”, making politics and men closely associated with one another and leaving non-political activities to women.

(Caha 2005:10)

Consequently, since patriarchy consigns women to the private sphere – by making them raise children inside the phallic walls of the family as well as makes them do mere housework in the homes and families, there is a need for women to transcend the limiting, chauvinistic walls of the private sphere – by transforming the dynamics of the public sphere through their involvement particularly in political actions. It is in view of this that Chinua Achebe’s vision of women translates into creating Beatrice Nwanyibuife – “A woman is also something” (87). Yes, women are something; and Beatrice, Achebe’s prototype woman is “endowed with beauty, brains and brawn” (118) needed crucially for the transformation of the public sphere. Addressing the issue of whether the people could be considered represented or marginalised in making political decision as well as enhancing the ideals of the public sphere and democratisation, Achebe has given women’s contribution to democratic process a voice by his creation of Beatrice. Beatrice’s characterisation/persona in *Anthills of the Savannah* ultimately evokes the hallmark of Achebe’s preoccupation with feminist principle, which is an integral part of resolving postcolonial Nigeria’s contradictions.

The craft of *Anthills of the Savannah* finds substance in Achebe’s women’s political participation. In furtherance of this argument, Ojinmah perceptively echoes similar view: “there is a synthesis and assertive projection of the new views contained in the earlier works” (1990: 84-5). This perspective according to Ojinmah is in rhythm with “Beatrice’s feminist activism” (1990: 85), which is central in resolving the postcolonial Nigerian politics, narrowed public sphere and power dissonance. Thus,

It should be noted that Achebe moves from the peripheral role women assume in the earlier novels to playing a central role in shaping and mediating the realms of power in *Anthills of the Savannah*... Beatrice is the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of socio-political schema ... The portrayal of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of charting the course of female emancipation.

(Fonchingong 2006: 45)

In the novel, there is a palpable portraiture of women as being conscious of the need to hold power for societal recognition and just society. Women in this regard consider men’s wielding of power as the basis for their historical denigration and oppression:

In the beginning Power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking ah his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, *Idemili*, to bear witness to the moral Nature of authority by wrapping around power’s rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty.

(102)

In re-working power and subverting depersonalising loci of authority for expanded public sphere, it is vital to understand that Achebe's women have conceptualised power beyond mere tyranny and repression by men. Rather, they consider its performance in various societal interactions, socialisations and politicking. This conceptualisation of power is in congruence with Michel Foucault's thesis in his *Power/Knowledge*, in which he stresses that power

Must be analysed as something which circulates ... something which only functions as a chain ... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application.

(1980: 98)

Beatrice therefore sees expanding the discursive arena (the public sphere) as a means of acquiring power for the emancipation of women and the marginalised, who have been in men's thralldom; hence, power for her is not fixated; it is fluid, and can be used by any group to further their objectives, especially in the political process.

Among the various ways of contesting the realm of power is gaining knowledge on how to move the society forward through political participation. Through knowledge, women seek to find voices necessary and capable of transcending the contradictions in world; hence, knowledge is associated with power (Foucault 1977: 27). Beatrice's knowledge gained from first class education in England is essentially the source of her knowledge/power, to borrow Foucault's term. And as a changer of her world, she insists that insights gained from acquiring education (knowledge) should be made available to the people in order to rise above tyranny.

Also, Beatrice's depiction in the novel symbolises *Idemili*, the mythic goddess of "Water of God" (Diala 2005: 187), responsible for neutralising men's power drunkenness. In his tellingly titled book, *The Anatomy of Female Power*, Chinweizu, brings to life the manipulative, persuasive and smooth kind of power that women wield that is essential in transforming the public sphere. This is because while patriarchal prowess could be obtrusive and crude, the power of women is rather more political in nature: it dwells on the mind and thought process, which are agents of political process. Let us here Chinweizu:

Generally then, whereas male power tends to be crude, confrontational and direct, female power tends to be subtle, manipulative and indirect ... From a male-centred point of view of what power is ... it is easy to dismiss it as power of an inferior type, just because it is not hard, aggressive or boastful like the highly visible male form.

(1990:12)

The form of power above finds counterpart in the kind of power Beatrice is imbued with in *Anthills of the Savannah*, where Achebe depicts her as a politically manipulative character "between men and power" (Diala 2005: 187).

In changing the concept of womanhood in the "Old Testament" (97) as Achebe demonstrates with the characterisation of Beatrice, contesting power with men is

technically a function of making impact in the public sphere; it shows women's metamorphosis from the private to the public sphere. Achebe also orchestrates how this space functions as a catalytic and illuminating platform that puts in perspective the psychological condition or the private tragedy of one of the protagonists (Beatrice), who is on a mission to dramatise the true worth of women (Touaf and Boutkhil 2008: XViii). Beatrice's mission to truly present women's history, which has been grossly warped by patriarchal ethos is informed by the fact that

The original oppression of women was based on crude denigration. She caused men to fall. So she became a scapegoat. No, not a scapegoat which might be blameless but a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering Man chose thereafter to heap on her.

(97)

From her depiction in the novel, Beatrice could be seen as Achebe's prototype Amazon. Her ironclad will to change Kangan politics smacks of the portraiture of mythological Grecian Amazons, women of Aba Women's Riot of 1929 and Ousmane Sembene's women. The forte of her political and feminist turf is lodged in her quality education, exposure, proclivity and quest for political participation. No wonder she insists Ikem Osodi, the journalist and the editor of *The Gazette* realises that there are three kinds of women in her own thinking: "...peasants, market women and intellectual women" (92); she belongs to the last group: intellectual women. Beatrice is not in the same league as Achebe's other women, who are seen as "good women" (Udumukwu 2007a: 1), passive, apolitical and unthinking in his earlier works. Thus,

The good women, in Achebe's portrayal drinks the dregs after her husband. In *Arrow of God*, when the husband is beating his wife, the other women stand around saying it's enough, it's enough. In his view, that kind of subordinate women is good woman.

(Adeola 1990: 42)

Rather to be seen as "good woman", who are passive wearers of masculine straitjacket, Achebe uses Beatrice to illustrate his ideo-aesthetic perspective on new woman – a departure from his previous refraction of womanhood. Achebe's view on new women, translates into real woman, who are participants in the widening of the public sphere as well as a contributors in the political re-engineering of the postcolonial Nigerian state. In his *Signature of Women*, Onyemaechi Udumukwu brings to the fore the saliency of new (real women):

The real woman ... is that woman who even in the face of tyranny will not remain silent. In the history of Nigerian nationalism, for instance, the real woman is epitomised by the activities of a group of women who are today known by the Aba Women's Riot of 1929.

(2007a: 1)

In reconstructing the public sphere for the development of democratic culture, the voice and choice of women are a sine qua non. In this connection, "we need more and more women to speak out in public" (Ezeigbo1996: 16) in order to redefine humanity's

imperilled political history. This is largely why Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah*, questions Ikem's idea about the political roles of women, even though Achebe presents Ikem as a promoter of liberal philosophy (91). Although Beatrice's feminist consciousness is informed by the desire to change women's embittered history, but there is also an acknowledgement of the expansion of the public sphere through this attempt: her portraiture interrogates largely "the actual exclusion of women from the art of governance, as well as their inability to wield power" (Acholonu 1996: 321) in the public sphere. In her characteristic manner to further the metamorphosis of women from private individuals, without any clearly defined public and political roles to publicly accepted people in politics, Beatrice reasons that "to be public is to do something that the public will recognise and acclaim" (Glover 2004: 10). This is what she has done by seeing her private issue with Ikem as a bridge to better the lots of womanhood in the public space.

In addition, Beatrice's view about the political participation of women inheres in expanding the public sphere through putting women at the centre of history. Her feminism is within the perimeter of the new women – "The New Testament" (98) women, who are on a voyage to put women as subjects of history, not objects. In her feminist philosophy,

Feminism as a method and discourse is animated by a desire to reconstruct history in order to reconstruct the woman as subject. This implies that the woman is presented or re-presented not as a mere object of history, put at the margin.

(Udumumukwu 2007a: 7)

In substantiating the above position, women's participation in politics, which is a public affair, is a mark of their gradual but steady movement from the peripheral role they performed in the "Old Testament" (98) to mainstream (public) role. It is in doing this that "The sweeping, majestic visions of people rising victorious like a tidal wave against their oppressors and transforming their world" (99) comes pointedly.

Conclusion

It is important to state that the actions, voice and portraiture of Achebe's new women regarding transcending the contradictions of patriarchal arrangement go beyond the realm of fiction. Correspondingly, new Nigerian women (as epitomised by Beatrice) in *Anthills of the Savannah* have broken their silence through political participation and widening of the public sphere – thereby shrugging off their legendary albatross of marginalisation, repression, victimisation and exclusion from political affairs. As a consequence, Achebe's women's political actions, which resonate with breaking the public-private dichotomy as well as their empowerment through access to political participation, is a sine qua non for good governance, participatory democracy and widened public sphere. In this regard therefore, committed literature, the one that Achebe writes is a vehicle for impacting the public sphere for robust, inclusive politics in Nigeria and Africa by extension.

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