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Representation of Women in Achebe's *A Man of People* and Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to examine the representation of women in selected novels of Achebe and Ngũgĩ, two prominent African writers. In the male-dominated society of Africa, women are treated as subordinate. Their place is restricted to the four walls of the kitchen. They are expected to obey submissively the rules attributed to them by society. With the invasion of British colonizers in Africa, the condition of women became more pathetic. Women had to suffer both in the hands of natives as well as colonizers, both physically and mentally. This condition of women was vividly portrayed by two distinguished writers Achebe and Ngũgĩ. This study examines the ways in which both the writers have presented women in their novels *A Man of People* and *A Grain of Wheat* respectively. On the basis of these two novels, the study explores how women are presented as weak, submissive, victims of exploitation on one hand and as bold and courageous on the other. After scrutinizing these aspects, the study adopts a comparative approach to examine the parallels and differences in women's representation in both novels.

Key terms: subordinate, submissive, exploitation, courageous, comparative approach.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the representation of women in the selected novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. These two writers from Africa have delineated women as a frequent subject in their novels. They have portrayed the condition of women in traditional African society and how it changes with colonial invasion.

In traditional African society, women are highly respected and have a respected status in society. There is historical evidence of African women being warriors, queens. Political power and economic independence are parts of their lives. They are engaged in various occupations like raising crops, preparing farm products. Women also held leadership positions. However, they have to suffer a lot due to patriarchal social set up as well as the

practice of polygamy which often results in women marrying men much older than her and throwing older wife for the younger one.

With the colonial invasion condition of African women has changed. Colonization takes away from them the political and economic involvement that they enjoyed earlier. The public sphere was dominated by both men and women earlier. Colonization creates the distinction that the public sphere is for men and entraps women in private sphere where they have to perform domestic duties. With the commercialization of agriculture and alienation of land, economic independence of women are also ended. They have to become dependent on their male counterparts for everything. Even they are deprived of getting access to education. Moreover, they are also physically exploited by white colonizers. Thus women have to face double oppression both because of native people and colonizers. To describe double oppression, Frances Beal has used the term "dual jeopardy" in her 1969 essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female".

In this paper, Achebe and Ngũgĩ are viewed as different from each other in view of their representation of women in their novels *A Man of People* and *A Grain of Wheat* respectively. Both writers have depicted the condition of women in their native society. Achebe has depicted women as weak and submissive who couldn't stand for themselves. He portrays the Igbo women as a silent victim of patriarchy which is not historically accurate. Igbo women are not as subordinate as Achebe has portrayed in this novel. They are active participants of political, social and economic spheres. On the other hand, Ngũgĩ's representation of women is bold and courageous though some of them are traditional and patriarchally stereotypical. He has dealt with the exploitation of women both in the hands of colonizers and native men.

A comparative approach is adopted to reveal the similarities and differences in the representation of women in both the novels. Both Achebe and Ngũgĩ have chosen women as a common subject in the novels. This study will attempt to explore how they have presented women in these two novels and what makes them different from each other.

Representation of Women in *A Man of People*:

The well-known Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe has captured his native Igbo society and its people in his novels. In his 1966 novel, *A Man of People* Achebe deals with Odili, the young educated man and his conflict with Chief Nanga, the politician. Set on an anonymous

African state the novel centers on Odili's opposition of dishonest Chief Nanga. In Achebe's novel, women are generally portrayed as traditional, submissive. Traditional patriarchal society treats women only as objects of pleasure. In this novel Achebe has portrayed women as traditional and modern, educated. Here there are women like Mrs. Nanga who is traditional and woman like Eunich who is educated and independent.

Achebe has portrayed women as passive, non-existent entity without their own identity in this novel. Mrs. Nanga is not happy with her husband yet she has no way out. Another character who is helpless like Mrs. Nanga is Edna, to be the wife of Mr. Nanga. In spite of being educated, she is not being able to use it for her own purpose. She is sold by her father to Chief Nanga who sponsored her education. Among the female characters in the novel, there are variations. There are highly educated, professional women like Eunich and Mrs. Akiloand also uneducated women like Odili's mother and Edna's mother.

Women are mere object of pleasure in the society of Nigeria. This picture is also visible in Achebe's novel. Odili says, "The trouble with my father was his endless desire for wives and children. Or perhaps I should say, children and wives. Right now he has five wives-the youngest a mere girl whom he married last year. And he is at least sixty-eight possibly seventy"(Achebe 27). When Chief Nanga seduces Elsie, as compensation he tells Odili, "If you like I can bring you six girls this evening" (Achebe 66). These show the attitude towards women in society. Women too take it as granted. When Odili tries to tell Edna not to marry "an ancient polygamist" like Nanga, she says, "That is the world of women" (Achebe 90). The position of women is also clear when Peter says Odili about Edna, " He is planning to marry her according to native law and custom. Apparently, his missus is too "bush" for his present position so he wants a bright new "parlour-wife" to play hostess at the parties"(Achebe 20).

Politics is the core of the novel *A Man of People*. Yet very tactfully Achebe has kept the women characters away from politics. This is evident in the very beginning when Chief Nanga introduces Odili in the political meeting, whereas omitted his intended wife Edna. "I had noticed that the minister had skipped her when he had introduced his party to the teachers" (Achebe 14). This "functionality of women's systematic omission operates in Achebe's novel; the interplay between omission and introduction (absence and presence) serves as a crucial structuring device" (Osinubi 91).

Feminist critics argue that lack of education is the reason behind the exploitation of women and their inferior status. Mary Wollstonecraft suggests that both the sexes should be educated so that women turn into men's companions in marriage rather than their mistresses. According to Kate Millet, "If knowledge is power, power is also knowledge, and a large factor in their subordinate position is the fairly systematic ignorance patriarchy imposes upon women" (Millet 42). It becomes easy to suppress women if they are uneducated. But this argument of feminist critics seems baseless when one looks at the representation of women in *A Man of People*. Edna, though educated, is not free from the oppression of patriarchy. Neither she has the courage to oppose, nor individual identity. Achebe doesn't seem much importance to women's education. In spite of being educated, Elsie is treated only as a sexual object. Though Achebe has portrayed some women as educated, independent, they lack individual identity. They are portrayed only in relation to men. In spite of being educated, Eunice is recognized only in relation to Max, as his companion. "she sat at the edge of her chair, wringing her clasped hands like a nervous schoolgirl. Her lips seemed to be forming the same words that he was uttering" (Achebe 117).

There is no doubt that, in the novel there are some characters who are educated and modern. But Achebe doesn't seem to put them in a positive way. It is clear from the protagonist Odili's preference for Edna instead of Eunice. For him, Edna "had just right amount of education"(Achebe 118). It shows his stand against higher education. Educated and independent women are seem to be depicted as moral loser. The influential party woman, Mrs. Eleanor John is presented in the party meeting at Grammar school, sitting on the Minister's left, "smoking and fanning herself"(Achebe 13). The Barrister Mrs. Akilo came to Mr. Nanga to sleep in his wife's absence. Odili says, "I had nothing against the professional women-in fact I liked them in their way-but if emancipation meant people like that other lady lawyer who came to sleep with illiterate Chief Nanga for twenty-five pounds a time(as he confided to next morning), they could keep it"(Achebe 118).

It can be, therefore said that Achebe has portrayed the exploitation of women and how they are bound to obey the norms imposed upon them by society. Though they get access to limited education, society expects them not to choose what they want but to adhere to the codes and conducts of patriarchal society submissively. Those who adopt a modern lifestyle and self-independent, are not regarded as good or admirable.

Representation of Women in *A Grain of Wheat*:

Acknowledged Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is the author of many well-written novels like *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*. A prominent subject in Ngũgĩ's fiction is the condition of women. In his 1967 novel *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ deals with this subject matter which shows a marked shift regarding his representation of women.

The oppression and exploitation of women in African society are well-known to all. They are the victims of both patriarchy and colonization. Those women who blindly follow the rules imposed by society are regarded as ideal. They hardly dare to protest against the oppression. This pathetic condition of woman in Kenya is represented by Ngũgĩ in his novels. However, in the later part of his career, a transformation is seen regarding his representation of woman.

Double oppression of African women both the hands of colonizers as well as indigenous people are clearly reflected in Ngũgĩ's novel *A Grain of Wheat*. In this novel, he has portrayed women from various angle. On the one hand, he has portrayed women as the victim of patriarchy as well as colonization. On the other hand, he also portrays women as bold and courageous, influencing figure of society.

In Ngũgĩ's novel, women are seen as the victim of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a prevalent phenomenon of African society. In a male-dominated society, it can't be expected that women will get equal freedom and status like men. It is seen that women are always suppressed, exploited and considered as subordinate in a patriarchal society. In the patriarchal society of Kenya, women are viewed in a similar light. They have to suffer both physically and mentally. One of the committed writers of Africa who has tried to present the country realistically, Ngũgĩ has poignantly shown the problem of patriarchy and its harsh impact on women.

A Grain of Wheat deals with the oppression of women in the polygamic society of Kenya. Women are viewed as property to men. They were considered in terms of their physical appearance. Men marry and leave the women when they are bored with them and find younger brides. Karanja's father has four wives. Waimuru "was the third of the four wives that Karanja's father had acquired by paying so much bride price in goats and cattle. He acquired them, yes, and then left them to their own resources"(Ngũgĩ 220). Men

considered women as an object for sexual gratification. The victims are women. The sufferings of Wangari, Gikonyo's mother started with her husband's attraction towards another woman. "He got new brides and complained that the thighs of the first wife did not yield warmth anymore. He beat her hoping that this would drive her away"(Ngũgĩ 71).

There is no doubt that men treat women only as objects. But what is surprising is that women are so used to the tortures that they take all these as a natural phenomenon of their lives. Instead of standing against they herself adopt these and criticize those who revolt. One such character is Mumbi's mother Wanjiku. When Mumbi leaves Gikonyo, her parents don't welcome her back with open arms. "A parent did not encourage a daughter to disobey her man. Wanjiku had even ridiculed Mumbi's feeble explanation...The women of today surprise me. They cannot take a slap, soft as a feather, or the slightest breath, from a man. In our time, a woman could take the blow and blow from her husband without a thought of running back to her parents" (Ngũgĩ 176).

A Grain of Wheat also depicts women as the victim of colonization. The British invaded Africa and exploited them in the name of upliftment. They oppressed them from all directions and victimized them. With colonization, the condition of women became more pathetic. History shows that before colonial invasion women engaged themselves in social, political and cultural fields. But colonization stood as an obstacle in the freedom of women.

The condition of women became more pathetic during the Mau Mau Movement. People were taken away from their home. "After you were taken away, beating was not isolated from to one person here, another one there...Women were allowed out two hours before sunset to go and look for food...The new DO did not mind the cries. He even permitted soldiers to pick women and carry them to their tents...Wambuku died in the trench. They took her body and threw it into a grave dug a few yards from the trench"(Ngũgĩ 139). Mothers had to warn their daughters not to be raped in the dark. Moreover, colonization disrupted the normal traditional life of the people for which people had to suffer. All the hardships that Mumbi had to undergo are the result of colonization. It all started with Gikonyo's arrest and when he was sent to a detention camp. Otherwise, there would not be complicity that Mumbi had to face throughout her life.

Ngũgĩ has realistically portrayed what the lives of women are like during the colonial period and the miserable condition they have to face in the name of patriarchy and colonization. It is done by other writers also. But what makes Ngũgĩ distinguished is, instead

of merely portraying women as the victim who bears everything submissively, he portrays them in a new light. In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ has portrayed women as positive, powerful who are strong enough to live their lives without the blessings of men. Oppression and exploitations are surely there, yet in this novel women are seen as freedom fighters, influencing figure of society. Here his women are not submissive but bold enough to face any kind of complexities. One such character is Wangari, Gikonyo's mother. Her strength is seen the way she is able to settle alone after she is thrown away by her husband as he no longer finds her sexually attractive. She even manages to send Gikonyo to school. Her determination and strength are also seen in her comment to Gikonyo when he beats Mumbi, "Touch her again if you call yourself a man".

In *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ has dealt with the story of a group of people from Thabai who are about to achieve independence. Through the flashbacks in the experiences of characters, he has captured the picture of the independence struggle in Kenya. In the novel, Ngugi explores the contribution of women to the independence struggle of Kenya. Here he portrays women characters as sole participants of freedom struggle. Women had played a heroic role in the struggle and it is reflected in characters like Wambui, Njeri, Mumbi.

Wambui is an active participant of the Mau Mau struggle against colonizers. "During the Emergency, she carried secrets from villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns. She knew the underground movements in Nakuru, Njoro, Elburgon and other places in and outside the Rift Valley"(Ngũgĩ 19). She has the power to influence people and good leadership quality. "She believed in the power of women to influence events, especially where men had failed to act or seemed indecisive"(Ngũgĩ 175). An outspoken woman, Wambui never fear of anything. In a general meeting at Rung'ei during the worker's strike she openly insulted those men who didn't come out. She said, "Was there any circumcised man who felt the water in the stomach at the sight of a white man? Women, she said, had brought their Mithuru and Miengu to the platform. Let therefore such men, she jeered, come forward, wear the women's skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women"(Ngũgĩ 175). Wambui's status in the novel is also seen from the comment of General R on the day of trial when he said, "Wambui will be the judge. Koina and I will be only elders present at the hearing"(Ngũgĩ 234).

Another character whom Ngũgĩ has portrayed as patriotic is Mumbi, Gikonyo's wife. She is the embodiment of strength and beauty. Mumbi "is the first fully developed example

of strong female characters who became increasingly important in Ngũgĩ's work and indicative of shifts in his depiction of women gender issues"(Williams 64). She does the works that are not expected from a woman. When the home guards turned her hut into red flames, she "tied a belt around her waist and took on a man's work...Next, she went to her father's small forest and cut down black wattle trees for posts and poles"(Ngũgĩ 136-37). In the words of Michael Vaughan,

She is more fully situated within a complex of family relations than are any of other characters, and this provides the basis of her associations with the themes of communal empathy, redemption, and regeneration. It is Mumbi who first mentions the songs of the villagers, composed spontaneously as they are forced to dig trenches around the new agglomerated village during the emergency. It is Mumbi who really inspires the social redemption of Mugo when she breaks down his sense of isolation through the force of her sympathy. It is Mumbi again, who inspires the regeneration of Gikoyo through the image of her won newly-won independence(48).

Ngũgĩ shows the transformation of his women in the novel. It is clearly evident in Mumbi. After bearing so much from Gikonyo she decides to leave him. She strongly tells her mother that she won't go to his hut. She says, "I may be a woman, but even a cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall"(Ngũgĩ 176). This shows her transformation from a submissive wife to a strong woman with self-respect. "I will not go back to his home, not if he kneels before me"(Ngũgĩ 228), Mumbi says. New firmness and awareness of independence arise in her. She walked away from Gikonyo with determined steps.

From the analysis what is seen of Ngũgĩ is that he presented women as strong and active participants of society. They are victims of the patriarchal social set up, yet they are brave enough to overcome the oppression. They are not mere observer but also active participants of society like their male counterparts.

Comparison between Achebe and Ngũgĩ:

Both Achebe and Ngũgĩ have dealt with some prominent issues of society in their novels. One common theme of them is the representation of women. After analyzing the ways in which both the writer have presented women in the two novels, it is seen that there are certain similarities as well as differences in the representation of both the writers.

Both writers deal with social reality. Hence, the exploitation of women, their suppression will definitely be a common issue. Because that is what women have to face in the patriarchal society of Africa. In both, the women are seen as victims of patriarchy. Men view them as the weaker sex and their function is to satisfy men only. When a man feels that he is not getting pleasure from his wife, he replaces her with a younger one without thinking once what will happen to them. This is evident in both novels. In *A Grain of Wheat* Wangari is the victim whereas in *A Man of People* the victim is Odili's mother and Mrs. Nanga also. They stand for those African women who suffer in the hands of patriarchy.

Both writers have presented women as bold and rebellious in the two novels. However, it is more apparent in Ngũgĩ than in Achebe. In *A Grain of Wheat*, most of the women are bold and rebellious. The characters like Mumbi, Wambui, Njeri are examples of this. In *A Man of People*, Achebe has portrayed Eunich as bold and revengeful. She killed the murderer of her boyfriend Max. "Then she opened her handbags as if to take out a handkerchief, took out a pistol instead and fired two bullets into Chief Koko's chest"(Achebe 132).

But more than similarities both the novels shares contradictions. The core of these two novels is political. *A Grain of Wheat* deals with the freedom struggle of Kenya and *A Man of People* deals with political corruption in post-independence Nigeria. But both the writers approach in delineating the role of women in the political field are different. Ngũgĩ has portrayed women as active participant in politics. Women are equal contributor to the independence of Kenya from colonization. Mumbi, Wambui are active participants of the Mau Mau struggle. But Achebe very tactfully omits women from political fields. He uses women only as a subordinate to men. In the political meeting at the Grammar School, Chief Nanga doesn't feel it necessary to introduce Edna to the public as she is a woman whose only job is to be his intended wife.

Another notable difference lies in both the writer's depiction of the lives of women. Ngũgĩ, in *A Grain of Wheat* deals with the struggle of women, their strength, their insecurities. He clearly depicts the life of Gikuyu women during Emergency, their exploitation as well as their rebellious attitude. But Achebe's novel hardly takes this matter into account. *A Man of People* centers around the male characters. Women are used only in their relation to men, without any individual identity. He even doesn't bother to raise the issues related to women.

In Achebe's novel, there is hardly any social status attributed to women. They are the mere caretaker of household whose only function is to satisfy their husbands. They don't have the privilege to get involved in any socio-political matter. In spite of being educated, Edna doesn't have the right to take decisions regarding her future. She is forced to marry the middle-aged Nanga only for money. But in *A Grain of Wheat*, Ngũgĩ has given an opposite picture of women. He has portrayed women as decision-maker not only of their own life but also of society. Mumbi chooses Gikonyo as her life partner instead of Karanja. Afterward, she herself decides to leave him and go to her parents. Wambuku is also seen as the judge of society who is given the responsibility of giving judgment regarding Mugo's betrayal of Kihika. As *A Man of People*, in *A Grain of Wheat* women are not depicted as a mere spectator of events and silent victim of patriarchy.

There is another remarkable distinction between the depiction of women in both writers. Ngũgĩ's women are friendly to one another and stand as support for each other during bad days. Mumbi and mother-in-law share a close bond and support to each other. Wangari "had found a daughter in Mumbi with whom, even without the medium of speech, she could share a woman's joys and troubles" (Thiong'o 96). But it is not present in Achebe's *A Man of People*. When Chief Nanga decides to marry young Edna to make her his parlor wife, Mrs. Nanga accepted it in an enthusiastic way. In spite of knowing what would become of Edna after marriage, she doesn't try to help her, even being herself a woman.

From the comparison between representation of women in *A Grain of Wheat* and *A Man of People*, it can be said that in spite of having dissimilarities between both the novels regarding nature and temperament, they share some similarities also. Both novels show the pathetic condition of women in patriarchal African society. Their exploitation as the weaker sex is prominent in both the novels. But Achebe's women are traditional and submissive whereas in Ngũgĩ women are strong enough to revolt. Like Achebe's women, they are not silent victim of oppression.

Conclusion:

The subordinate position of women is apparent in Achebe's novel *A Man of People*. A social realist, Achebe captures the role of women in Igbo society where they are considered as inferior to men. They are mere puppets in the hands of man. Patriarchy doesn't allow them to live as they wish. No matter educated or not, women's lives remain the same. Achebe

seems to pay little focus on education as a tool of empowerment. In spite of having education, Edna has no voice of her own just like uneducated Mrs. Nanga.

Ngũgĩ's *A Grain of Wheat* depicts the double oppression of Gikuyu women both by blacks and whites. He presents the miserable condition of women during the Emergency in Kenya. On one hand, they are the victim of the patriarchal social set up, on the other white people use them as an object of their sexual pleasure. Ngũgĩ has vividly portrayed all these issues. However, his women are not weak and submissive. They are brave enough to stand against their exploitation. No doubt there is the traditional woman like Wanjiku, Mumbi's mother in his novel. Except a few, most of his women characters are rebellious and active participants in political as well as social activities. Ngũgĩ has portrayed them as active political participants.

After discussing the representation of women in both the novels, a comparison is done to find out the similarities as well as differences. It is found that both Achebe and Ngugi realistically portrays condition and status of women in their respective clans. They show how women are treated only as sexual objects and thrown out when there no longer remains any sexual appeal in their body. But more than similarities there is a contrast in the depiction of both writers. Ngũgĩ has given his women social status, unlike Achebe. In *A Grain of Wheat*, women are active in social issues like men. But in *A Man of People*, Achebe doesn't attribute any kind of status to his women. Eunich is portrayed as a companion to Max only, without having an identity of her own, though she is highly educated. Achebe keeps his women away from politics which is in contrast to Ngũgĩ's novel.

At last, it can be said that the representation of women in the selected novels of Ngugi and Achebe are not similar though they have some basic similarities. Both writers are successful in dealing with the oppression of women in society. But in attributing the qualities to their women characters both of them stands apart. While Ngũgĩ's women are strong and active, Achebe portrayed them as passive and submissive.

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