

## The New Achebe Women and other Matters: A Critical Analysis of Selected Stories from Chinua Achebe's *Girls at War and Other Stories*

Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu (PHD)

### ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe, one of Africa and indeed the world's finest writers have often been accused of writing his women in silence, subservience, servitude and total submission. Achebe's women are often seen but not heard and sometimes like in the case of Ojiugo in *Things Fall Apart*, are beaten for negligence. The uncomplimentary portrayal of women by Achebe however, first assumed a gradual change in *Girls at War and other Stories* and by the time he wrote *Anthills of the Savannah*, his women are possessed agency. *Girls at War and Other Stories* is Chinua Achebe's collection of short stories selected from different periods of his writing career. The titled story adopts a new a pattern of female character portrayal in Achebe's writing. This paper, deploying the theory of realism, takes time to study female characterisation in this collection of short stories while noting the acquisition of agency and the centrality of the women in the stories and also takes on other critical issues in the society including corruption and vote buying in a crooked democracy. It concludes that like everything else, culture can change, and if literature mirrors the society, it needs to also change to reflect the times.

**Keywords:** *Women, Character, Achebe, Portrayal, Agency, Realism*

### Introduction

*Girls at War and Other Stories* is Chinua Achebe's collection of short stories selected from different periods of his writing career. The titled story "Girls at War" and a few others are set during the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970. The titled story adopts a new a pattern of female character portrayal in Achebe's writing. Achebe's text prior to the publication of *Girls at War* depicts women as second-class characters. This has been the topic of criticism by several scholars on Achebe's work. One of the most prominent voices on the weak female portrayal of Achebe is Florence Stratton, who in her book *African Literature and the Politics of Gender* believes that "Achebe's women are, indeed, 'down on one knee'. If not both, before their menfolk and they are regularly making an exit, no doubt, 'in their proper order'..." (25).

Citing instances from *Things Fall Apart*, one sees that in trying to restore the African dignity, "The question is, however: Does Achebe attempt to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to African women? Does he tell his female readers 'Where the rain began to beat them'?" (24) With the exception of Chielo, the priestess, there is no notable woman that contributes to the growth and advancement of Umouofia. Same way in Petersen, Kirsten Holst's "First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature" she states that in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

[T]raditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any

Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu (PHD)  
Department of English  
and Literary Studies  
University of Nigeria,  
Nsukka

Correspondence to  
Elizabeth Odachi Onogwu (PHD)  
Elizabeth.onogwu@unn.edu.ng

say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being. (38)

The state of women in “Girls at War” is however different. From the consciousness of Reginald Nwankwo, Achebe brings to fore an acceptance that girls are not to be taken lightly. Reginald meets Gladys at a checkpoint on his way from Onitsha to Enugu. One sees the contradiction in his mind as he does not mind been searched, but also, the reason that people feel been searched doubts one belonging to the upper echelon. On this day, Gladys searches his vehicle even after his pronouncement of “My name is Reginald Nwankwo, Ministry of Justice.” To his amazement, after the search, she reminds him that he helped her in the past, and this shows Gladys' level of discipline. As Achebe puts it:

That was the day he finally believed there might be something in this talk about revolution. He had seen plenty of girls and women marching and demonstrating before now. But somehow, he had never been able to give it much thought. He didn't doubt that the girls and the women took themselves seriously; they obviously did. (88-89)

This by Reginald that women can be taken seriously, is the turning point for the women in Achebe's text, as this can also be seen in his later novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*. The narrator goes on to say that “after that encounter at the Akwa check-point he simply could not sneer at the girls again, nor at the talk of revolution, for he had seen it in action in that young woman whose devotion has simply and without self-righteousness convicted him of gross levity” (89).

The credence of weight in both the narrator's voice and the character soon see an abrupt switch eighteen months after, as things tend to get worse in war torn Biafra. As the narrator puts it: “Girls became girls once more and boys boys” (89). Characteristic of a patriarchal society where men are in charge and often see the woman's body as vessel for pleasure and dependent on the ordering of men, there is a turn in the life of Gladys when Reginald meets her again. From the change in her revolutionary deviance to the mild acceptance of vanity and 'proper placing' recollected in the narrator's voice, Gladys is brought back to the world women are often given:

It was wonderful, he thought, but even more it was tragic. She wore a high-tinted wig and a very expensive skirt and low-cut blouse. Her shoes, obviously from Gabon, must have cost a fortune. In short, thought Nwankwo, *she had to be in the keep of some well-placed gentleman, one of those piling up money out of the war* (91) (Emphasis mine).

Gladys' disillusionment and cynicism are not only caused by the havoc wrecked by the war but the attitude of men towards girls during the period. Even Reginald in his candour finds himself in the class of the same people who are set to exploit women because of the war. When he sees himself talking about parties during the war, he chastises himself thus:

He was immediately and thoroughly ashamed of himself. He hated the parties and frivolities to which his friends clung like drowning men. And to talk so approvingly of them because he wanted to take a girl home! And this particular girl too, who had once had such beautiful faith in the struggle and was betrayed (no doubt about it) by some man like him out for a good time. He shook his head sadly. (93)

Although, Gladys still has the initial energy and belief she had about the war; her intelligence and prowess still intact as evidenced in her conversation with Reginald, she had lost something. Gladys affirms that she is not the same old person Reginald met at the beginning of the war, she upholds the narrator's view that “girls became girls”. However, a tinge of the intelligent and radical Gladys survives when she retorts to Reginald that whatever lifestyle or fashion and luxury girls cling to during the war is what the men want.

Achebe ends the story with a complete illustration of absolute hypocrisy and ironies on Reginald's path as is shown from mild actions of his claim of not dancing during the war, yet he is the one that takes Gladys to the party. Importantly, Reginald, a commissioned officer runs to safety when faced with danger pushing past Gladys and a fellow crippled soldier while Gladys gives her life to save the crippled soldier. As Stewart Crehan

states in “Ironies of Balance in Achebe's *Girls at War*”, the life of Nwankwo shows the ironies of things. He believes that Gladys has changed for the worse, “yet it is she who dies trying to save the crippled soldier, and it is Nwankwo who, pushing past her, saves his own life” (28).

“Marriage is a Private Affair” is also an early story of Achebe. The story was first published under a different title in 1952 before Achebe's popularity with *TFA*. Besides *TFA* and *AOG* which centres on the conflict between traditional and modern order, “Marriage is a Private Affair” is one of Achebe's stories which shows the chaos in modern order of identity and the old order. The story was first published as “The Old Order in Conflict with the New”. Bernth Lindfors calls this story Achebe's first true story. He holds that “Achebe's first true short story in the *University Herald* appeared in May 1952 under the title “The Old Order in Conflict with the New.” This was reprinted as “Beginning of the End” in *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories*, and was given yet another title, “Marriage is a Private Affair,” when revised and revisited in *Girls at War and Other Stories*.

Nnaemeka and Nene intend to get married but the former's family would not agree to the marriage because Nene is not an Ibo woman. However, when she finds out that her marriage will not bring happiness to her would-be father-in-law, she is surprised. Nnaemeka informs her that: “You have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of the country” (24). This shows the double identity that people of postcolonial countries are exposed to: those in remote villages and those in cosmopolitan cities which represent the old order and the new.

While Nene is not caught in the “double consciousness and unhomeliness” (Tyson, 422) that characterise individuals of postcolonial nations since she spent all her life in the city, Nnaemeka confronts what Lois Tyson calls “psychological limbo” of two worlds, the traditional which his father belongs to, and the modern sensibility that is inherent in cosmopolitan cities that evolved with colonial presence against old ethnic consciousness.

Okeke, Nnaemeka's father is a Christian and albeit an educated man, this new culture does not redeem him from the prejudice that comes with inter-ethnic marriages. While Okeke believes that “nothing is different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background” (26), he still does not mind if Nnaemeka rejects the wife he arranges for him. He is shown to be willing to compromise when he asks his son, whose daughter the city wife is. On finding out however, that she is from Calabar, he became antagonistic and despite his new 'liberated consciousness' his identity of being an Ibo man is still present.

The expulsion of Nnaemeka from his father's house and life shows the struggle that individuals go through when their lives evolved with cosmopolitanism that sets them apart from the rural life in their villages. Unlike Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease*, Nnaemeka sticks to his decision to marry Nene despite the problems from his father. When he sends his wedding pictures to his father, Okeke mutilates Nene out of the picture and sends the mutilated parts back to him in the city. Despite the stone heartedness of her father-in-law, Nene adopts the peaceful path, which shows her resoluteness. Her final letter to Okeke about his grandsons becomes for the old man, a balance that changes his mind. Through this, Achebe places tradition in a place that makes it weak and unable to win against the modern order of things. Lindfors notes that “Tradition thus ultimately crumbles in the face of persistent modernity” (100).

“Dead Men's Path” is another of Achebe's stories that show the conflict between the new order and the old. Although, in this story the old order wins against the new, this reaffirms Achebe's assertion in *Hopes and Impediment* about the responsibility of the writer. As the author wrote in “The Novelist as a Teacher” that his goal is no “... more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them” (46). “Dead Men's Path” proves this truth in the character of Michael Obi.

Being “outspoken in his condemnation of the narrow views of these older and often less-educated” teachers, Obi believes that he is modern and in his peculiar and often superior modern ways, everything archaic and African should be ousted out of existence. The conflict ensues when he takes the position of a headmaster in Ndume Central School. His wife, like him, also believes that with their new position, “everything will be just modern and delightful” (62). The narrator tells that “In their two years of married life she had become completely infected by his passion for “modern methods” and his denigration of “these old and superannuated people in the teaching field who would be better employed as traders in the Onitsha market” (62).

As Obi commences work in the un-progressive school to give it a modern touch and how schools should be run, he finds that a path exists across the premises of the school that connects the village to the shrine. When he

learns that trying to close the path has led to issues between the community and the school authority in the past, he insists that was in the past, and that in the modern era, the needful needs to be done which is to close the path. So “Heavy sticks were planted closely across the path at the two places where it entered and left the school premises. These were further strengthened with barbed wire” (64). Three days after, the Priest of Ani visits:

“Look here, my son,” said the priest bringing down his walking stick, “this path was here before you were born and before your father was born. The whole life of this village depends on it. Our dead relatives depart by it and our ancestors visit us by it. But most important, it is the path of children coming in to be born ... (65)

Characteristic of Obi's modern sensibility and loathe of the old order, he tells the priest that it is such an idea that the school stands to correct: “The whole purpose of our school,” he said finally, “is to eradicate just such beliefs as that. Dead men do not require footpaths. The whole idea is just fantastic. Our duty is to teach your children to laugh at such ideas” (65). With the conversation between the two, Achebe places the priest on the point of reason and lays bare Obi's arrogance, which is the arrogance that is exemplified by the Europeans in most African stories. The priest tells Obi that the world is vast enough for duality as shown in the hawk and the eagle having space to both perch. However, Obi insists that they create another path, which he sarcastically reiterates that he “don't suppose the ancestors will find the little detour too burdensome” (65).

The death of a woman during childbirth which a diviner declares is caused by the insult on the ancestors by the fence which leads the village to take a drastic action. The villagers did not only pull down the fence and destroyed the flowers round the path, but wreaked havoc on the entire school including pulling down a building. What arises from the situation is that the white inspector that Obi intends to please by showing how hardworking he is writes “a nasty report on the state of the premises but more seriously about the “tribal-war situation developing between the school and the village, arising in part from the misguided zeal of the new headmaster” (65). Lindfors believes that by the destruction of Obi's hard work, “The Old has reasserted its supremacy over the New” (102). This agrees with Kolawole Ogunbesan's assertion about Achebe that he believes, “the African writer should be both a cultural nationalist; explaining the tradition of his people to a largely hostile world” (Ker, 84).

Achebe's “The Voter” tells the struggle of Rufus Okeke who is nicknamed Roof. Set in a Post-independence Nigeria in the town of Umuahia, Roof is shown as a man of relevance, as he is shown to have forfeited a bright future as a bicycle repairer in Port Harcourt out of his own free will “to return to his people and guide them in these difficult times.” (17) The difficult times alluded to is the period of politics and elections in a newly independent country where several people are trying to get relevant in the political affairs of the country.

Roof is one of the persons in the People's Alliance Party, which has Umuofia's illustrious son Chief the Honourable Marcus Ibe as the Minister of Culture in the outgoing government. Because of Roof's intelligence and expertise in election campaigning, he is crucial to Chief Marcus team. The undertone of the story, however, is not just about Roof, the political climate is also central to Achebe's storytelling. He tells the reader, for instance, that:

The villagers had five years in which to see how quickly and plentifully politics brought wealth, chieftaincy titles, doctorate degrees and other honours some of which, like the last, had still to be explained satisfactorily to them; for in their naivety, they still expected a doctor to be able to heal the sick. Anyhow, these honours and benefits had come so readily to the man to whom they had given their votes free of charge five years ago that they were now ready to try it a different way. (18)

This shows the disillusionment that comes after the first republic where the commoners were just spectators in the glory of the people, they elected to serve them in government. It is also crucial to note that Chief Marcus is a personality of questionable character as it is said that he impregnated his student before joining politics to avoid dismissal. The knowledge of this and the ultimate choice of Roof, in what in some instances will be tagged betrayal, shows the conduct of the people in the politics. Achebe shows through the character of Marcus, the irony of being there for the village, and in this case:

he remained devoted to his people. Whenever he could he left the good things of the capital and returned to his village which had neither running water nor electricity, although he had

lately installed a private plant to supply electricity to his new house. He knew the source of his good fortune, unlike the little bird who ate and drank and went out to challenge his personal spirit. Marcus had christened his new house “Umuofia Mansions” in honour of his village, and he had slaughtered five bulls and countless goats to entertain the people on the day it was opened by the archbishop. (18)

As typical of most of the stories in the collection, Achebe uses irony to show the events in the society of his characters. In the case of the Honourable, it is shown how everything centres around him. Despite the fact that there is no running water nor electricity, he makes provision for his mansion alone, and the only way of showing devotion to his people is to nickname his personal mansion after the village. As shown in *A Man of the People*, Achebe demonstrates that the postcolonial experience of the Nigerian nation is one that is caught between political disappointment and the cultural struggle that shows the African sensibility and modern events. Chief Marcus's opponent offers Roof money to vote for the opposition party, POP. Because of the offer's worth, he decides to accept it.

When he tries to inform the opposition party member that he works for Marcus, he on the other hand tells him that “Marcus will not be there when you put in your paper...” (21). Roof accepts the offer but to his dismay, the opposition party person simply referred to as “The man” sends his companion and “he brought forward an object covered with a red cloth and proceeded to remove the cover. It was a fearsome little affair contained in a clay pot with feathers stuck into it” (21). He informs Roof that it is an “*iyi*” from Mbanta. Roof swears by the charm that he will cast his vote for Maduka who is the candidate from the opposition party. On the election, after most of the people were done voting, Marcus asks his campaign boys to cast their votes and asks Roof to go first.

Confronted by his loyalty to Marcus and the fear of the “*iyi*”, Roof “folded the paper, tore it in two along the crease and put one half in each box. He took the precaution of putting the first half into Maduka's box and confirming the action verbally: “I vote for Maduka.”” (23). This shows the dual pose of Roof's life. The story can be adduced as a metaphor for the in-between affairs of most Africans with modernity and the traditional sensibility; the dual allegiance of most Nigerians to the highest bidder; an obeisance to the Christian God on the one hand and traditional ethos on the other. Unlike the other stories where either tradition wins or the modernity does, here there is a sense of wisdom in Roof trying to survive by neither casting his vote in any of the boxes. By tearing his ballot paper, his vote is void, but he satisfies his heart and conscience. While the attitude of Roof is questionable on moral ground for accepting to vote for POP, Achebe places him on focus so that he is not a villain. The humour attached to his act makes him the readers' friend, and by that his choice becomes at once a wise choice marking the struggle between African tradition and modernity.

“Civil Peace” is the tenth story in *Girls at War*. The story tells of the situation after the civil war and the resoluteness of Jonathan Iwegbu whose saying “Nothing puzzles God” serves to show his strength in handling life's squabbles. First, he counts himself lucky that he survives the war with his wife and three out of four children and “As a bonus he also had his old bicycle—a miracle too but naturally not to be compared to the safety of five human heads” (71). The narrator puts it that another miracle for Jonathan is finding his house untouched by bombing that destroyed several houses. And, to this too, he adds that indeed nothing puzzles God.

The dramatic scope of the story takes effect when Jonathan goes to collect his twenty pounds. On receiving the money, “Jonathan soon transferred the money to his left hand and pocket so as to leave his right free for shaking hands should the need arise, though by fixing his gaze at such an elevation as to miss all approaching human faces, he made sure that the need did not arise, until he got home” (73-74). He tries to be careful not to lose the money like a man who nearly went mad in public after he lost his money. Despite his carefulness, Jonathan hears a knock on the door which turns out to be thieves. The scene between Jonathan and the thieves is the most dramatic as the thieves ironically assist Jonathan in calling out for help against robbery:

“You done finish?” asked the voice outside. “Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!”

“*Police-o! Tief-man-o! Neighbours-o! we done loss-o! Police-o!...*”

There were at least five other voices besides the leader's.

Stanwart acknowledges that “good tief” has the courtesy to knock on Jonathan's door and “the robbery is negotiated like a normal business transaction” (19) It is ironic that the thief calls the whole act as civil peace: “Awrighto. Now make we talk business. We no be bad tief. We no like for make trouble. Trouble done finish.

War done finish and all the katakata wey de for inside. No Civil War again. This time na Civil Peace. No be so?" (75).

The thief goes as far as 'consoling' Jonathan's wife saying "Ah, go missisi de cry again. No need for dat. We done talk say we na good tief. We just take our small money and go nwayorly. No molest. Abi we dey molest?" (75). They also negotiate with Jonathan on the money they want to collect. When they ask for hundred pounds and he informs them that the only money he has is the twenty pounds egg-rasher, the thief says that, "OK. Time no de. Make you open dis window and bring the twenty pound. We go manage am like dat" (76). When neighbours gather the next day to commiserate with Jonathan, his family were acting like nothing transpired the night before: his wife is already preparing her akara balls, his son cleans dreg of palm wine from beer bottle, and Jonathan is already tying his gallon to his bicycle. With voice of reason in Jonathan which shows how the inner peace in him comforts his life, he tells his neighbours that "I count it as nothing," he told his sympathizers, his eyes on the rope he was tying. "What is *egg-rasher*? Did I depend on it last week? Or is it greater than other things that went with the war? I say, let *egg-rasher* perish in the flames! Let it go where everything else has gone. Nothing puzzles God" (76).

In conclusion, Achebe's *Girls at War* like all his novels are epochs of wisdom that serves to mirror society in all starkness and forces society to confront its hypocrisy, corruption, weaknesses and falls while applauding humanity when such applauds are deserved. Achebe has always believed that African writers do not have the luxury of "Art-for Arts sake" as the burning issues confronting African society dictates that our literatures and art in general be applied. However, Achebe manages to effortlessly, couch all the lessons on life in humorous, lyrical and simple English that exposes his uncommon gift at all times.

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