

A Comparative Study between *A Man of the People* and *Petals of Blood*: Representation of Subjugation of Women in Post-colonial Period

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People (1966) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Petals of Blood (1977) are two timeworn novels in which the female characters have been portrayed according to the society of Africa at that time. Two novels reflect the conditions of women after the post-colonial period of Kenya and Nigeria. The paper intends to elaborate the status of women, their subjugation and their survival in patriarchal society; besides, the paper highlights the social, economic and political positions of women in light of feminism. The aim of this research is to present the condition of women, and to justify how African women are being subjugated at that period.

Keywords: Post-colonial period, patriarchal society, justify.

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe (1903-2013) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1938-present) are two prominent writers in African literature. Two novels present the state of feminism in post-colonial period in Africa through the female characters in both texts. In December 12, 1963, Kenya declares its independence from Britain. *A Man of the People* and *Petals of Blood* are written just after the independence of Africa. African women do not get their right to establish themselves even after the independence. Women become the victim of the patriarchal society's lust and power. Edna and Elsie, two female characters in *A Man of the People*, become the victim of Chief Nanga's power, lust and money. In the same way, Wanja, the major female character in *Petals of Blood*, becomes the victim of men's lust and money.

From the primitive age, women are treated badly in a male-dominating society. Though modernism brings a radical change in thought by breaking the traditional rules and existing ways of thinking in art, literature, science and psychology, the subjugation on women remains the same as before. Their souls do not get the light of hope and freedom. They are being treated like other commodities or objects. Men are not conscious about women's rights, whether it is colonial period or post-colonial period. Though some women get a few opportunities like men, most of the women don't get the taste of rights, independence and freedom. Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o bring these issues in light through their writings. This paper tries to portray the shadow of their thoughts about the vulnerable conditions of women in light of their two novels.

2. Objectives

The paper deals with three major objectives:

- To analyze the social, educational, economic and political conditions of female in

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post-colonial period.

- To observe the role and usage of education at that time for women in light of two selected novels.
- To inspire students for further studies in the field of Stiwanism.

3. Literature Review

This study aims to synthesize existing scholarly perspectives on the narrative structures and thematic concerns of *A Man of the People* and *Petals of Blood*. Moreover, the study is placed within the context of empirical works previously carried out by other researchers on the two novels.

Critics present their argument about Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* from different perspectives. Nardia Lipman says that, the easiest and safest assessment to make of the attitudes to women in *A Man of the People* is that these attitudes are multidimensional. One may analyze this complexity not only to present the traditional idea on gender of African people, but also to represent the mirror of modernism and globalization. In the novel, Mrs. John and Mrs Akilo represent the wave of globalization and modernization through their education and occupation. On the other side, Edna and Mrs. Nanga, two rural women represent the role of African traditional women. They have the desire to get the taste of independence, but the society and environment force them to bow their heads on African tradition and customs. Nevertheless, we cannot say there has been an overall positive or negative portrayal of women by Achebe.¹ Merun Nasser highlights the character of Eunice. She says, the only female characters are welcome exception to the above rule and thus warrants mention here is Eunice, Max's girlfriend in *A Man of the People*. She is depicted as the "new" woman - emancipated, assertive and independent, unlike Achebe's other women. Odili describes Eunice as beautiful young lady who has confidence and brain at the same time. Eunice is not the heroine but her action makes her more memorable, more impact-oriented and more awe-inspiring than the traditional hero, Odili.² About the novel, Rajesh expresses that, normally women are considered as the weapons tradition-bearers whose main duties are to manage home and raise children. Women have traditional boundaries and stereotypes. Achebe presents those stereotypes of that time through this novel.³ Another critic, Elizabeth Ben-Iheanacho argues that, patriarchal society tries to present women as weak, submissive, inferior and less important which is easily visible in Achebe's novel. Men play the power-role and try to prove themselves as powerful, superior and most important.⁴

About *Petals of Blood*, many critics present their statements from various perspectives. Mala Pandurang expresses that, Wanja Kahili, a barmaid and a whore, is the victim of brutal capitalist society in Kenya. Through her character, class division and exploitation is presented here.⁵ Another critic James Stephen Robson argues that, Wanja is a character who suffers much in the novel. She is the victim of male-dominating society and suffers for the past like Munira, she leaves Ilmorog during crisis like Karega and she removes herself from cooperative project for Theng-eta and Sunshine Lodge like a goddess of welfare. She is like a mother-figure who does not think about her personal benefit and sacrifices herself for the welfare of others. She is a phoenix who stands beside the farmers of Ilmorog in their crucial period and builds an organization for them.⁶ Ahmad Jasim Mohammad Alazzawi states that, Ngũgĩ' presents women's role in

the novel from various perspectives. A woman can be mother, educator, politics-conscious and bread-earner at the same time. Wanja and Nyakinya have patriotic souls; they work against colonial exploitation and oppression. Women help men to stand against British colonialism and want to remove the dark shadow of colonialism from Kenyan society. In the novel, the writer presents women's natural qualities which help them to stand against oppression of patriarchal society. They try to break the boundaries of patriarchal society and bring freedom for themselves.⁷ About the novel, Anfal states that, by taking the advantages of capitalism, Kimeria gets the courage to rape Wanja. His misuse of power destroys Wanja's life and indirectly throws her towards prostitution. Capitalism makes men to treat women as sex objects.⁸

After examining all these researches on both texts, this study identifies that no researcher analyzes both texts in a platform. Thus, this paper is motivated by the interest to fill up the gap what previous studies have not yet accomplished.

4. Methodology

This paper is a qualitative research for the engagement in the task of textual analysis and interpretation. This study represents the states of women in postcolonial Africa through the female characters of two novels. Female characters in both texts are evaluated by the concept of the third wave of feminism. The data sources of this research are divided into two groups, primary and secondary data. The main data source is two texts, *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe and *Petals of Blood* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Some additional references are also used to support the information in analyzing data. The supporting data of this research are taken from books and articles. Concerning procedures of the analysis, firstly the female characters of both selected novels are introduced. Later, a comparative discussion of these selected novels creates a line with the predetermined objectives.

5. Theoretical Framework

Feminism is socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal, and social equality of the sexes. The purpose of feminism is to create equity, which is essential for leveling the playing field to ensure that no one's rights are violated due to factors such as race, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, political or other beliefs, nationality, social origin, class or wealth status. About feminism, Kate Millett in her book *Sexual Politics* has indicated that feminism is basically a system of social, political and equality between sexes. She argues that, men dominate women not only through laws and politics, but also through culture, books and films.⁹ Judith Butler has expressed her thought in *Gender Trouble*, in where she has mentioned that, gender is something that we perform by our social expectations.¹⁰ In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir shares her thoughts about feminism. According to her, women are shaped by society, culture, religion, biology, even in history.¹¹ This paper is an attempt to study the selected novels, *A Man of the People* and *Petals of Blood*, from the perspective and period of third wave of feminism. The struggle of women does not come to an end even after the independence of African countries from British. For being women, almost all female characters in both texts are deprived of their basic right from the society. Moreover, they become the victim of subjugation.

6. Textual Analysis

In *Petals of Blood* and *A Man of the People*, writers present women's helplessness, limitations and sufferings in the male dominating society. They present the submissive characters as well as rebel characters, both educated and uneducated women, both empowered and vulnerable women, both marginalized and privileged women, both optimistic and pessimistic women throughout their texts. The main purpose of this chapter is to highlight female characters of both texts and find out the social, economic or educational conditions of women in African society, after the independence.

6.1. Female Characters' Analysis: *A Man of the People*

Edna is a prominent character in *A Man of the People* who is Chief Nanga's would-be wife and Nanga provides a great amount of dowry after the engagement to the father of Edna. Later, Odili Samalu gives a higher amount of dowry to marry Edna. Throughout this, it is clear that dowry system was available at that period. Edna's father marries her off where he gets higher dowry, he never asks Edna whether she wants to marry Chief Nanga or not. It seems that money is more important than women's consent. Edna has no Economic freedom and right to establish her decision in patriarchal society. She is also the victim of Odili and Chief Nanga's political conflict; though later Odili loves her. She is being objectified here.

Elsie is Odili's girlfriend but she does not get proper love and respect from him. She is a nurse in profession. Odili never fully defines their relationship and doesn't ensure her safety in Chief Nanga's house. Odili states to Chief Nanga that Elsie is merely a "good-time girl." Whenever Odili brings Elsie as a guest to Chief Nanga's house, Chief Nanga seduces Elsie and Odili's presence is available at that time in that house. Odili does not take any step to support Elsie, who is his girlfriend though. Elsie works as a nurse and has the economic freedom, but she has no safety and power to protect herself for being a woman. The two major male characters, Odili Samalu and Chief Nanga, misuse her feelings to fulfill their own temptations.

In *A Man of the People*, Eunice is Max's fiancée who works with him in Bori. She is a lawyer like Max and also an active member of the Common People's Convention (CPC) party. She is beautiful, intelligent and her fiancé, Max respects not only Eunice, but also her thoughts and ideas. Later Chief Coco, a person of opposite party, kills Max. Eunice takes the revenge of the death of her fiancée by shooting twice in chief Coco's heart. Indirectly, she is the sufferer of political subjugation of male dominating society.

Mrs. Nanga's character shows those women who aren't conscious about their rights. She is Chief Nanga's wife. Odili describes her as "homely" and "matriarchal". She does not have the much knowledge in English language. Thus, she uses her native language for communication. Mrs. Nanga seems to be deprived of education, as she uses pidgin language. Mr. Nanga is an educated and privileged person. He has the power, economic solvency and ability to make his wife to be educated. But he doesn't take any necessary step to educate her. About Mr. Nanga's second marriage, Mrs. Nanga remains silent. Besides, Mr. Nanga makes a sexual relationship with Elsie after having Mrs. Nanga as his wife. Even the original name of Mrs. Nanga is absent in this novel; her only identity is "Mrs. Nanga". She does not get proper respect, love and attention from her husband. Her state represents the vulnerable women's identity crisis in male-dominating society.

Jean is an American ambassador who has stayed Africa with her husband. She represents the western women in the text. She has the freedom to do anything whatever she likes. Achebe describes her as a beautiful, bumptious wife and as an excellent ambassador.

Odili's mother had died at his childhood and his father marries again. Odili's step mother has a huge gap with his father. It gives a hint of child marriage. Like Odili's mother; Edna's mother is also a representative of village women who is unconscious about her rights and her daughter's future.

6.2. Female Characters Analysis: *Petals of Blood*

Wanja is the main female character in Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood*. At her early age, Wanja has a relationship with his father's friend named Hawkins Kimeria and becomes pregnant by him. Her math teacher finds out the fact and tries to blackmail her to fulfill his lust. Thus, she has to leave school. Wanja proposes Kimeria to marry her to 'save her face'. In patriarchal society, only woman get the responsibility to save their faces, virginity and family's reputations. Men has no such kind of liabilities. However, later, to earn her livelihood, Wanja becomes a barmaid and later takes prostitution as a profession.

Another prominent character Nyakinyua is a wise-old woman and respected by the villagers of Ilmorog. She is the grandmother of Wanja. She is like a social- influencer and contributes for the betterment of the villagers. According to the word of Ngũgĩ in chapter two, the great woman is "the mother of men: there was a sad gaiety in her voice, she was celebrating rainbow memories of gain and loss, triumph and failure, but above all suffering and knowledge in struggle." She is the character who gives a positive vibe about the position of women in post-colonial Kenya.

A woman named Mukami shows the necessity of accepting women's decision in family affairs. She is Munira's beloved sister who loves Karega. Later, she has welcomed her death because her father has given her only two options, either choose her lover Karega or her family. Her death presents the sufferings of women for patriarchal society's decisions. As only man is considered as decision maker, women have no right to express their feelings or to express their decision. They have no right to choose their life partners according their own will.

Mariamamu is an older woman than Munira and works in Munira's father's land. Munira likes her and loves to spend times with her. She has a son named Ndinguri who is a rebel in Mau Mau Movement and police has caught him while carrying weapon for the movement. Mariamamu suffers for being a mother of a rebel.

Another character, Julia, is Munira's wife. In Part 1 Chapter 5 readers find her as a submissive wife. But her husband has no loyalty. Her husband likes Wanja and also sleeps with Lilian. Though Julia waits for Munira at home, Munira has no concern about her. Julia is a woman who has received less love, less care and less attention from her husband. Julia presents the traditional role of a wife which is imposed by patriarchal society.

7.1. Social Subjugation of Women in Postcolonial Africa

In Kenya, the social conditions of most of the women remain vulnerable as before. In *A Man of the People*, Edna's father has selected Mr Nanga for marriage without the consent of Edna. In *Petals of Blood*, Mukami doesn't get the support from her family to marry

her beloved. For this reason, she accepts a tragic death. Edna and Mukami have no freedom to select groom for marriage. Traditional patriarchal behavior in decision making is presented in both of the texts.

Taking bribe was very common thing at that time. Edna's father has taken a huge amount of bribe from Mr Nanga and later he has also taken bribe from Odili for the marriage of Edna. From these two contexts, it is clear that greed and bribe-taking were very common facts in the post-colonial period. Women's values are evaluated through the amount of their bribe.

Polygamy and child-marriage were the severe issue in Kenya even after the independence. Polygamy is the practice of keeping multiple spouses in the same time. In *A Man of the People*, Mr Nanga wants to marry again even after having Mrs Nanga. Odili's father has five wives and 35 children. In chapter 3, it is seen that Odili's mother is the same age of Odili. This situation gives the idea about child marriage at that period. In *Petals of Blood*, same situation can be seen. To save her reputation, Wanja wants to marry Kimeria at her childhood period after having his wife. In part 1, Chapter 3, Karega reveals that his father has two wives.

Rape and pedophilia were the alarming phenomenon in Africa at the time. Women are being treated as an object of lust by the upper class people. By imposing their power, upper class men rape, seduce and exploit women. In *A Man of the People*, Mr Nanga exploits Elsie and in *Petals of Blood*, Kimeria exploits Wanja to fulfill their lust without the consent of women.

There was no consciousness on birth-control and maternity in post-colonial Kenya. Child mortality rate was also high at that time. In *A Man of the People*, Odili's father has 35 children, and some of them are died. Odili's mother's death after the birth of Odili proves the vulnerable conditions of women's health and maternity at that time. In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja gives birth at very early age. Wanja's child has died at his childhood and gives her the taste of 'unfulfilled motherhood'.

Power practice and sexual harassment on women were common issues in post-colonial Kenya. In *A Man of the People*, Mr Nanga seduces Elsie and also wants to marry Edna through his power. In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja is also a victim of power. When villagers of Ilmorog go to the city, a boy named Joseph becomes sick and Kimera takes the opportunity by keeping Wanja with him in exchange of helping villagers through his power.

Respects towards women are rarely seen in both of the texts. In *A Man of the People*, Odili's lustful behavior towards Elsie can be seen when Odili brings Elsie to Mr Nanga's house. Mr Nanga is also has a lustful attitude towards women. Wanja becomes a victim of the lust of Kimeria in *Petals of Blood*. In part 1, Chapter 4, Munira has also watched Wanja with lustful eyes. Prostitution and availability of brothels has also risen after the independence. Wanja directly involve with brothel. Most of the male characters in both texts treat women as a commodity. They also think that women are nothing but a sexual object.

Social Security for women was not much strong after the independence of Kenya. In *A Man of the People*, Mr Nanga takes the opportunity of Edna's poverty. Elsie is being raped in the Minister's house and the minister himself is the rapist. In *Petals of Blood*,

Wanja is being raped in several times. Wanja is also being harassed in her School. It seems that, the government of that time has failed to ensure proper safety for women and children.

Wages discrimination between men and women is also visibly presented in *Petals of Blood*. Karega's words present the wage discrimination. He says, men think that they do heavier job than women, for this reason men ask for extra wages for themselves. Like other women, Wanja, herself doesn't get any respected job to earn her livelihood.

7.2. Educational Condition of Women in Postcolonial Africa

After political independence, African people feel an urge to be educated. Education is the basic need of human and the prerequisite of social and intellectual development. But it is a matter of sorrow that, the women and men are not conscious about women's education and their basic rights.

In *A Man of the People*, there is a mixture of educated and uneducated women. As a rural girl, Edna does not get the opportunity of education and accepts her poor fate. She makes herself convince by thinking that, women's era is limited. She accepts her misfortune as a woman. Even after being the wife of a Minister, Mr Nanga also remains unconscious about his wife's education. Mrs Nanga speaks pidgin and has passed the entrance to a secondary school. According to her, women do not need to go for higher study like men. This thought of Mrs Nanga presents the submissiveness of women and limp-state of female education at that time.

Besides these women, Achebe highlights some empowered women who are educated and quite independent. Eunice, Elsie and Mrs Akilo are educated women. Eunice is an educated girl, as well as a lawyer by profession. She and her husband practice law jointly. She is politics-conscious woman and also a co-founder of a political party named Common People's Convention (CPC). CPC works to expose the mask of corrupted government, Chief Nanga and his fellows. Mrs. Akilo, another educated woman shows educational and moral prudence in front of Mr. Nanga. In a party, Mr. Nanga offers her to stay his house, his wife's bedroom as a guest instead of spending money by booking expensive hotel. She rejects his offer through her prudence. Elsie is another educated woman who has studied with Odili in the same university. She is a nurse in a hospital in Bori and earns her own livelihood. Though she is educated and independent by profession, she does not get the taste of independence in patriarchal society. She fails to protect herself from Mr Nanga's lust; she fails to control her emotion towards Odili. By judging these women, it can be stated that by fortune some women get the privilege of education and economic freedom, but a large number of women remain uneducated and cannot get the opportunity to educate them in a proper way.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ presents gender discrimination in colonial education. In Part 1, Chapter 2, from Wanja's description, readers come to know that her math teacher has a desire to get Wanja's company. The situation presents the vulnerable condition of educational institution and moral shortage of male-teachers towards female students. Friendly and safe environments for girl's students in educational institutions are absent then. Though Wanja's doesn't have praiseworthy educational background, she urges Abdullah to send Joseph to the near-by schools. Mukami and other women's educational background are also ambiguous in the novel. It shows that, patriarchal society shows less concern on girls' education in post-colonial period.

7.3. Economic Condition of Women in Postcolonial Africa

In post-colonial Africa, most of the women felt the urges of economic freedom and empowerment, though the society fails to fulfill their urges.

In *A Man of the People*, some female's characters have their career. Achebe presents Jean as an ambassador, Eunice as a lawyer and political activist and Elsie as a nurse who can ensure their economic freedom. In the same way, Mrs Akilo also has economic freedom. On the contrary, Edna and Mrs Nanga have no economic freedom like other women in postcolonial period. Many women remain dependent to men for not having a job to earn their livelihood.

Ngũgĩ has a desire to present women equally as men. He tries to present the importance and contribution of women in economy. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ describes Wanja as an active woman. In part 3 of *Petals of Blood*, Wanja and other women formed the Ndemi-Nyakinyua Group to work together and cultivate the land. Their work proves the efficiency of women in the field of cultivation and economy. As a barmaid, Wanja's diligence towards work is also presented in the novel. Though there remains gender discrimination in wages and her father keeps his favor away from her, Wanja does not stop her journey. When the bar becomes closed, Wanja becomes a prostitute and opens a brothel and to earn her bread. Wanja's economic struggle gives herself a thought that, without becoming strong, she cannot be survived in the harsh, patriarchal society.

Ngũgĩ presents Mariam as a worker of Munira's father's farm. Though she earns money, her husband takes away her money and keep only little amount for her to survive. Man's torture towards woman is presented here, even after she earns! Though there remain a few workplaces for women, women's labor cannot be counted as efficient like men. Women have to work hard but have led a miserable life in post-colonial period.

7.4. Political Condition of Women in Postcolonial Africa

Both texts contain some scenario of political exploitation towards the common people, especially the women. In *A Man of the People*, Edna, Mrs. Nanga and Elsie are unaware women about politics; they have no involvement in politics. Rather, somehow they are victim of political power. A few upper-class women are portrayed as politically conscious. In chapter 1, a dinner party named 'Ego Women's Party' which is hosted by some upper-class women. Some women, like Mrs. Eleanor John and Barrister Mrs. Akilo, are directly involved with politics. Eunice is a political activist and works to build a political party. She has the spirit to stand against the POP party of Chief Nanga. Most of the rural women become politically unconscious like Mrs Nanga.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngũgĩ presents the name of Mau Mau rebellion (1952-1960). The Mau Mau rebellion was a Kenyan war against British Authority. Though Nyakinyua and Wanja support the rebellion, they have no direct involvement in the rebellion. Like Mukami, Julia and Lilian, many women show less interest in politics. Village women are unconscious about their vote of rights, about direct involvement in politics or about the selection of political leaders. There is a little participation of women in politics even after the colonial period.

8. Conclusion

Through *A Man of the People* and *Petals of Blood*, the readers come across the fact of the positions of women in post-colonial period. In these novels, women of that time have

felt the urge of being educated and economic dependency, but the society cannot ensure proper opportunities for women. Women's decision in any family matters is not been valued like men. Some women get the opportunities to prove their existence but most of the women fail to prove their identities. In *A Man of the People*, Elsie can ensure her economic freedom but her right of safety is violated. Eunice and Mrs Akilo have job, but they cannot cross the boundary of patriarchal society. In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja is a struggling woman and wants to gain her basic right in male-dominating society. Extreme feminism of western women towards African men is also presented through the character of Jean in *A Man of the People*. Without Odili's consent, she has seduced him. However, some male characters, like Max (*A Man of the People*) and Abdulla (*Petals of Blood*), remain supportive towards women. But most of the male characters, like Odili (*A Man of the People*), Mr. Nanga (*A Man of the People*) and Kimeria (*Petals of Blood*) are not supportive at all. Some city women, like- Eunice, Elsie, who are conscious about some of their rights, but their number is very few. Maximum women, like- Edna, Mrs. Nanga, Odili's mother, are unaware about their rights. This paper tries to perceive women in both texts from feminist perspective.

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