

CHAPTER VI

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The study of woman in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat, Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah and Nadine Gordimer's None to Accompany Me discloses the African vision of woman's gender-transcendent role as a leader of the people at the most crucial stages of the political history of the particular nations - Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa respectively.

The study of sociological evolution of African woman and its reflection in African literature establishes the significance of woman as a valid approach in comprehending African experience. Sociologically, the history of woman parallels the three stages of African political history : pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial. Sociologically, the African women inherited equality with men from their pre-colonial stage. But the colonialism exploited and destroyed their equality by creating adverse political and economic circumstances both for men and women. It changed their traditional ways of living and continued only patriarchy which involved sexual and social hierarchy. Post-colonial Africa found improvement in the positions of some educated women only, while, the majority remained oppressed. These

stages of changing status of woman are reflected in African fiction also. The African male and female novelists focus on three roles in particular—woman as a mother/wife, woman as a political activist, and woman as a sexual victim.

The heroines of the three novels show the history of the development of African woman's psyche in the second half of the twentieth century in particular. A Grain of Wheat shows woman as a redeemer through gender-oriented and gender-transcendent role of Mumbi. Anthills of the Savannah shows woman as an initiator of the process of change through the maximization of gender-transcendence through the minimization of gender-oriented role in Beatrice. None to Accompany Me represents woman as a missionary shaping the future with her transcendental self through exploration of her gendered self in Vera-Sibongile persona.

Mumbi, for Ngugi, is the mythical symbol of earth, land, nation or people. Her gender-oriented role is shown by her being a beloved, wife and mother. But she transcends this role when the novelist makes her symbol of land and of human self at personal, national and spiritual level as a young girl, wife and mother. She becomes a redeemer of the past.

As a young girl, Mumbi is Gikonyo's beloved, on national level she is primordial Kenya, and on spiritual level she stands for the first stage of human self in its process of evolution. As a wife, on personal level, Mumbi is Gikonyo's loving wife. On national level her betrayal by Karanja is Kenya's betrayal by the colonisers, and on spiritual level she shows the second stage of evolution of self emerging from its stage of innocence and introduced to external world with its complex political, social and economic exploitation.

As a mother, on personal level, Mumbi is the mother of Karanja's child. On national level, she symbolises redemption of the past by affectionately forgiving Karanja and thus puts an example of the need to accept and admit those who have committed mistakes, in the process of going to future. So unless and until Gikonyo understands Karanja's child and Mumbi's past, Mumbi will not continue her life with Gikonyo. On the spiritual level, the pure self exposed to the external world is transformed into a new self, innocence is substituted by experience. Mumbi learns that past must be accepted to build future as she herself has accepted it by bringing up Karanja's child with all her affection and she transcends her gender by her wish to call others to march forward to future with mutual understanding and affection.

The other women in A Grain of Wheat show the other roles than Mumbi's. Wambui, an elder woman of Thabai, is an active participant in the political changes in her country. She is also a practical woman who believes in continuing the life in spite of the shock of Mugo's confession. She is assigned the role of a judge in Mugo's punishment which emphasizes that women will be henceforth the judges and decision-makers of their society. Wangeri, Gikonyo's mother, has suffered a patriarchal blow of being thrown away out of home with a child by her husband. But she boldly brings up her child. She understands Mumbi's misery and Gikonyo's pains when Gikonyo sees Karanja's child in his home. Through Wangeri, the novelist shows a matured woman who understands her own people. } out of

Wanjiku, Mumbi's mother, believes in patriarchal culture. She makes Mumbi sober towards Gikonyo, and becomes an important link to bring them together. She, thus, shows the compromising psyche of African woman. General R's mother mutely bears the beating by her husband as she believes in patriarchal power. Wambuki, Kihika's beloved, represents those African girls who become the victims of colonial cruelty. Njeri, who secretly loved Kihika, proves to be a brave African woman who is killed in the forest while fighting against colonisers. } SP

Gitogo's mother lives a lonely life as her only son is killed by the colonisers. There is also the cruel drunkard, Waitherero, aunt of Mugo.

Like Mumbi, in Anthills, Beatrice is the mythical symbol of the Daughter of the Almighty, Idemili, but she is also an intellectual who becomes an initiator of the process of change. Maximization of her gender-transcendence is shown through her identification with mythical goddess Idemili which in its turn minimizes her role as a woman in traditional sense. This is done by emphasising her capacity of intuition which makes her prophetess and priestess. She is related to Ikem on the spiritual level and to Chris, her practicalist lover, on the emotional level.

Beatrice is trained for the role of a responsible leader. Being educated in London and working in the ministry, Beatrice never comes in contact with the ordinary people. But she gets an opportunity to establish her relationship with them. Through Agatha, her maidservant, Beatrice comes to know that being a master or servant is a matter of luck, and so, it could not be followed severely. By spending a night in Braimoh's room, she is made familiar with the urban poverty. Beatrice follows the path of Ikem and Chris after their deaths. Ikem dies fighting against the abusive use of power against common people

and Chris, too, dies while liberating a girl from the possible rape by the police officer.

Beatrice is successful in collecting around her a group of people which includes representatives of different classes of people in society. And in the company of such a group she initiates a change for stable and progressive society. She declares the collective parenthood of all of them for Ikem's female child and breaks the tradition of naming the child by its father, a male. She also names the child with a male name, Amaechina, meaning, 'may - the - path - never - change.' It is the path of Ikem who inspires others for struggle against evil. The child includes both sides-male and female in its persona. When looked at its appearance it is female, and when looked at its name, it is male. This new persona suggests a new identity for the future society which dissolves differences of class and gender.

The other characters in Anthills complete the other side of African women. If Beatrice is an intellectual, they represent the illiterates and half-literates who accept their life without any complaint. Elewa, Ikem's beloved, a salesgirl is very simple in her ways of behaving with Ikem. She expresses her sorrow over Ikem's suspension in her natural way by crying loudly without thinking of others sitting there. Although a half-literate, she agrees with Beatrice in naming her

child differently. Agatha, Beatrice's maidservant does not like her mistress's remaining alone with Chris and closing the door for her. Aina, Braimoh's wife, shows the urban poor life. Elewa's mother represents market women and Adamma is a student nurse-all of them show, in general, the status of women in African society.

The conflict between the gender-oriented and gender-transcendent roles in search of the essential self becomes the exclusive concern of Gordimer as is evidenced in the presentation of her two heroines – Vera and Sibongile – the white and black counterparts respectively embodying the South African reality. Vera, the white lawyer working for blacks becomes a missionary shaping the future of South Africa. She represents a highly educated female intellectual, who, in her dedication to the land as a socio-political activist, emerges with a self definition as a woman willing to re-orient and, if necessary, sacrifice the traditional roles in her family life as a wife and a mother or grandmother, for the society or nation. Vera's journey to self passes through clashes between her biological self, cultural self and spiritual self. This journey includes her early married life as a wife, a mother, and the beloved till the end of her affair with Otto, and her later married life.

Being a member of white privileged class of South Africa, Vera is conscious of her biological self. By divorcing the first husband she marries Bennet Stark for his beauty and sustenance in sex. Still she loves Otto Abarbanel, an Austrian about fifteen years younger than her and feels pride to find that he is a Jew. As a social worker she believes to be in love with a racial victim. Later when she knows that he is not a Jew but a Hitler baby, still her biological self finds it impossible to reject him sexually. But when her spiritual self makes her alert she slowly breaks the relationship.

The biological self of Vera is so strong that she forgets her grown up children for it. However, her cultural self recognizes within her the need of motherhood which leads to her care and love for her children and husband. This love for her family and children clashes occasionally with her official duties and calls for her attention at home. She is disappointed with her daughter Annick's lesbian life and Ivan's banking business but still she continues her social work. Eventhough she welcomes her grandson Adam, she does not become an ideal, traditional grandmother by completely devoting her life for caring him.

Being an intellectual woman, Vera is aware of the urge of her spiritual self-its urge for commitment to the cause of others beyond the self. This inner urge of self becomes especially crucial in relation to the

South African situations. Vera works faithfully for blacks. When Bennet goes to London and there is no possibility of his return she sells her old house and becomes 'a homeless' because she understands that she has to uproot herself as a white privileged woman and re-root herself as a member of the black majority in South Africa. She goes to live in the annexe of her friend Zeph Rapulana's, a black activist's house although she knows that Rapulana does not include her, a white, in his life. Her position in Rapulana's life is clarified to her when she encounters a girl from Rapulana's bedroom. Of course, Vera for whom sex was a luxury and who defined few years of her life in terms of sex, now arrives at a stage when neither her biological self nor cultural self is powerful but only spiritual self becomes dominant in her mind. Vera's ultimate choice is to belong to her land as a part of humanity beyond race, colour and gender.

Sibongile's journey towards the discovery of 'aloneness' parallels Vera's. Her sexual need is not dominant and it is not a luxury for her as she belongs to the humiliated class of blacks. Her desire for a male as a sexual being is fulfilled by her love for Didymus who is an activist. They lived in exile when Didymus was working for his black community. Sibongile's cultural self loves her husband and daughter, Mpho whom she gives proper education. She does not want Mpho to

experience the dirty and unhygienic life of ordinary blacks after their return home from exile.

In exile Sibongile and Didymus always longed for living together a happy and comfortable life without any tension. But after their return home their life changes. Sibongile becomes a popular activist working for her people through an organization called the Movement while Didymus is defeated in Movement's election. Sibongile's busy schedule does not allow her time for her home and she goes through a conflict between her worry for Didymus's depression due to defeat and her spiritual self's need to go beyond it and continue her social work. She expects that Didymus must come out of the past, accept his changed role as her own role is changed. While responding to the spiritual self's call to work for others, attending conferences and working sincerely, she faces the problems at home like Mpho's being made pregnant by Oupa, a married black, and worries about Mpho.

With the years, Sibongile's familial responsibilities reduce and her cultural self is satisfied with whatever time she gets for her family. Her biological self reaches such a stage that when Didymus could make love to her she feels no response. By now, she discovers that she must commit her life, like a missionary for the cause of her suffering people.

Although belonging to the black majority, for Sibongile there is the threat of death by the whites.

Without breaking her marriage and home and accepting the company of Didymus, Sibongile understands that she is alone in her fight, still she does not give up her work. She knows that both her role and work are of immense importance in the post-apartheid situations when her country is building a new stable and peaceful society.

The other characters in None to Accompany Me show other roles of women and their status in society than that of Vera and Sibongile. Annick, Vera's daughter although a lesbian, by adopting a black female child, tries to find a purpose in her life and discover her self. Mpho, the Maqomas' daughter, shows the situation of African school girls made pregnant at an early stage but she also indicates that being a daughter of a well-to-do family her life is settled by them. Mpho's grandmother represents the innocent African woman who regards abortion as sin. Oupa's wife represents the lonely life of the black women who live away from their husbands. When Oupa visits her without any intimation she is confused rather than excited. Zeph Rapulana's wife,

too, lives away from him. These black women show the typical traditional life style of African women.

Ngugi, Achebe and Gordimer thus explore the gender-oriented and gender-transcendent roles of African woman through their fictional vision of future African society. The three novels offer clarification about woman's place in the colonial and post-colonial African society. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe strive, in their novels, to explore the woman's role in African socio-political context as black novelists. Nadine Gordimer, on the other hand, is concerned with the woman's role in the racially discriminated South African society as a white female novelist. The novels, therefore, may be supposed to represent stages of the evolution of African woman from multiple perspectives.