



**CHAPTER I**

**INTRODUCTION**

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### INTRODUCTION

The explorations into the image of woman in African fiction have been mainly gender-oriented in their approach. They concentrate on the socio-historical perspective of woman in African fiction while expressing dissatisfaction with the over glorification of women by African writers. However, the African psyche is deeply rooted in the mythological modes of comprehension of Reality and hence, tends to regard woman from both perspectives, gender-oriented and gender-transcendent, the woman as victim of the traditional patriarchal social set up, and woman as prophetess or goddess in the form of Mother Earth, Land, Symbol of Nation, or Community.

This dissertation tries to establish organic relationship between gender-oriented and gender-transcendent roles of woman in the African fictional context. It deals with the three novels in particular-Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat <sup>1</sup>, Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah <sup>2</sup> and Nadine Gordimer's None to Accompany Me <sup>3</sup>. The two perspectives of gender-orientation and gender-transcendence are identified in Mumbi, the heroine of A Grain of Wheat. The maximization of transcendental role of woman necessitates minimization of her gender-oriented role in the characterization of

Beatrice, the heroine of Anthills of the Savannah. The conflict between the gender-oriented and gender-transcendent roles in search of the essential self becomes the exclusive concern of the South African woman novelist, Nadine 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.

Katherine Frank remarks about the limitedness of feminist approach to African literature, in particular, for its being 'stereotypical' or 'images of women' criticism and for its concentration on 'inferior literary works or on the flawed aspects of successful ones'.<sup>4</sup> Hence, she is of the view that in contrast to other western approaches, feminist criticism has had virtually no impact on African literature.<sup>5</sup> However, she does not offer a possible alternative mode or approach that may validate African experience from female perspective.

According to Carole Boyce Davies a positive image of woman is one that is in line with African historical reality. She states that feminist should relate text to the context of 'the world with which it has a material relationship'.<sup>6</sup> This view, no doubt, involves awareness of both perspectives of African women's study - the gender-oriented and gender-transcendent. Yet it does not develop the nature of essential relationship between the two.

Sybil

Alice Walker, the black feminist critic, has rightly pointed out the limitations of European feminism in the African context. She distinguishes black feminists from their European counterparts by describing them as 'womanist' rather than 'feminist'. According to her, a black feminist is exclusively concerned with people as a whole not with women in particular.

Roopali Sircar in her study of women in African literature tries, 'to place in a critical perspective the image of the African woman in written literature, within a socio-historical perspective'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, the very focus on the socio-historical reality about African woman results in an inadequate treatment of African woman in her gender-transcendent role as the symbol of her nation or community as offered in a number of African novels.

The tendency to idealise, glorify or sublimate woman is unfortunately interpreted as subordination of the real to the ideal and hence, suggestive of African writers' lack of adequate commitment to the lived experience. But it should be noted that idealization is, in the case of African writers, a method of coming to terms with the African reality which is, in many ways, far more complex and chaotic than the reality in the context of many other countries.

The reality in the African context involves compromising the native traditions with westernised ways of life introduced by the European colonisers. Confronting reality becomes an ordeal for the African society because of the white colonisers' strategy of racial discrimination that has poisoned social structure for centuries. Hence, the African reality is encountered by African creative psyche in its own terms and so should be comprehended as such. African writers naturally tend to define their meaning in terms of mythology because it is the crucial medium shared by both the community and the writer.

The three novels under study deal with three stages of African socio-political history of the second half of the twentieth century. A Grain of Wheat presents a peasant world of the early fifties in Kenya. Anthills offers Nigeria of the seventies and the eighties ridden by military coups while None to Accompany Me is a narrative of South Africa of the nineties. The novels choose the crucial moment from the political history of the respective nations. A Grain of Wheat picks up the day of freedom and links it with the period of nationalist Mau Mau Movement. Anthills deals with the overthrow of a military dictator as one of the recurrent phases in country's history. None to Accompany Me also chooses the moment of transition from the minority apartheid rule of the whites to the majority post-apartheid rule of the blacks.

The novels epitomise the novelists' visions of the future of their societies at the most crucial moment when the country is about to step out from the colonial past and enter into the post-colonial future. They gain extraordinary significance in comprehending African woman because their creators appear to explore the nature of the future society—peaceful, stable and progressive – through fictionalization of the most crucial period of country's history. The woman in the role of a heroine embodies the writers' vision of woman as the symbol of nation, society, people or masses. As a result, the heroine is elevated to the mythical status of a goddess. The minor women characters, on the other hand, project the novelists' awareness of the status of women in African society.

Thus the three novels validate the three historical perspectives of transcendence. They explore the nature of African woman's relationship with the past, the present and the future as a leader of the people as a whole. A Grain of Wheat visualizes woman as the Redeemer of the Past; Anthills discovers in woman an Initiator into Future and None to Accompany Me locates in woman a Missionary Shaping the Future as Present.

The chapter division is as follows :

The second chapter surveys briefly the sociological background of woman in Africa and its projection in African novel.

The third chapter studies woman as a redeemer of the past as is represented by Mumbi, heroine of A Grain of Wheat. It also focuses other women characters in the novel.

The fourth chapter studies woman as an initiator into the future as is represented by Beatrice, the heroine of Anthills. It also refers to other women characters in the novel.

The fifth chapter studies woman as a missionary as is represented by Vera and Sibongile, the white and black heroines respectively, of None to Accompany to Me. It also refers to other women characters in the novel.

The sixth chapter summarizes the conclusions, which emerge from the detailed study of the role of woman in the three novels.

SYNOPSIS

## REFERENCES

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3. Nadine Gordimer, None to Accompany Me, (London : Penguin, 1995).
4. Katherine Frank, "Feminist criticism and the African Novel", in African Literature Today : 14 Insiders and Outsiders, ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones, (London : Heinemann, 1984) p. 35.
5. *ibid.*, p.35.
6. Carole Boyce Davies, Introduction : "Feminist consciousness and African Literary criticism," in Ngambika : Studies of Women in African Literature, eds. Carole Boyce Devies and Anne Adam Graves, (Trenton, N.J. : Africa World Press, Inc., 1986), pp. 14-15.
7. Roopali Sircar, "A Different Image : An Introduction," in Women in African Literature : Twice Colonised, (New Delhi : Creative Books, 1995), p. 6.