

Sexist Matters: Power Play and Gendered Space in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Introduction

The setting of *Anthills of the Savannah* is Kangan, an imaginary country in West Africa, where Sam, a Sandhurst-trained military officer – also known as His Excellency, has taken the rein of power by coup d'état. There is a distancing of authorial voice via the use of varied narrative channels, multiple point-of-views; while at the same instance, Achebe orchestrates his social vision for postcolonial Nigeria, which is in the throes of prebendal pillage and misguided leadership. The national tragedy – considered as the gist of this fictive work is principally relayed by three friends: Ikem, Chris and Beatrice. The intricate postcolonial malaise is captured here by Beatrice:

For weeks and months after I had definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history as I could lay my hands on I still could not find a way to begin. Anything I tried to put down sounded wrong – either too abrupt, too indelicate or too obvious – to my middle ear. (82)

The above intractable tension in the polity occasioned by bungling military junta and socio-economic dissonance, are what *The Anthills of the Savannah* prefigures. The political crises in the novel escalate to counter *coup d'états*, power game, political assassination, feminist agitation and other integers of unwholesome state of affairs. However, in conspectus, the political turmoil in the novel basically stems from class struggle and power play, which are arguably fuelled by cultural materialist imperatives. The proemal exchange between Sam, His Excellency and Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for information is a presage of power play and class war, which are fully developed as the novel progresses:

You are wasting everybody's time, Mr. Commissioner for information . I will not go to Abazon. Finish! *Kabisa!* Any other business?

'As Your Excellency wishes. But...'

'But me no butts, Mr. Oriko! The matter is closed, I said.

How many times, for God's sake, am I expected to repeat it?

Why do *you* find it so difficult to swallow my ruling. On anything?

I am sorry, Your Excellency. But I have no difficulty swallowing *and* digesting your rulings.’ (1)

From the above speech act, Chris eventually pretends not to have conceded victory to Sam - but he ultimately subscribes to His Excellency’s (Sam’s) directives, as subsequently seen in the novel.

The portraiture of Sam depicts him as a military dictator and inept leader, who relies on brute force, hegemony and violence to consolidate his leadership and power base. Also, he considers the state machinery as a private estate – that ought to be used for the institutionalisation of mediocrity, private interest and above all materialist pursuits. The atmosphere in the novel invokes political buccaneering and crude use of force characteristic of the Third Reich. Hitler, the *Fuehrer* consolidated his power base by enforcing loyalty and subordination via clobbering his apparatchiks to submission in order to ensure perpetuity and clout. Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbles, who is known for dissemination of half-truths, cant and warped ideas, parallels Prof. Okong in the novel; while the portrayal of Johnson Ossai, Sam’s hatchet man and the belligerent Director of the State Research Council (14) in the novel, mirrors Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi chief of Gestapo (Secret Police). Sam (His Excellency) and his foot soldiers - his henchmen - constitute the cabal that tramples the nation under foot. Wole Soyinka in his *Season of Anomy* sees this clique that furthers violence, class attrition and materialist hegemony as “alliance of the purse and the gun” (134). But in contradistinction to the world-view of these power-profiters, are Ikem Osodi, Chris Okong and Beatrice Nwanyibuife. These characters are depicted by Achebe as sheer foil to His Excellency’s persona as well as his coteries’. We shall return to them presently.

It is against this social slough – redolent with power play, cultural materialism and praetorian landscape that Achebe’s artistic perspicacity is heightened to underscore his major concern in the novel: military dictatorship, unabated materialism and patriarchal hegemony in postcolonial Nigeria. In congruence with this position, Chidi Maduka in his article entitled “Chinua Achebe and Military Dictatorship in Nigeria: A Study of *Anthills of the Savannah*”, insightfully paints the same picture:

[...] Achebe defly opens the novel with an apt dramatisation of the power game which is a major concern of the work.

Sam is a power seeker who ruthlessly silences opposition in order to show that he constitutes a formidable power base capable of resisting the assault of political opponents. (Udumukwu 2007: 68)

In addition, Nwachukwu-Agbada's statement regarding *Anthills of the Savannah* appositely re-echoes this reality. For him, "the novel is a study of power in an African state, and shows how original ideals are swept aside by the concept of power personalisation" (92). Consequently, in one of the well-known first statements ever written, Karl Mark and Friedrich Engels began their classic, *The Communist Manifesto* (1884) as thus: "The history of all hitherto existing society, is the history of class struggles" (1992: 3). The overriding motif of this seminal masterwork was to unearth the subdued history of class struggle and the insidiousness of capitalist mechanism. It is also in this same light that Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) as well as other works that adumbrate the negation of patriarchal ethos, the overarching structures of man's world and the gender-blind, oppressive mechanisms of power relations are written.

Taking a cue from the aforesaid, it could be gleaned *a priori* that the key issues in postcolonial Nigeria are power struggle and unabated frontier materialism. In tandem with this assertion Ojinmah has lucidly noted that

In Achebe's view, the main problem in contemporary Nigerian society as well as in many independent African societies, is the lack of restraint in wielding power, added to an unbridled scramble for materialism, which in most cases result in the destruction of democratic principles. (1991: vii)

The cultural materialist resource and source for oppression of women are lodged in power struggle and ideology. And central to power struggle is the cultural scaffold at work in a particular social space. In their provocative work, *Conflict across Cultures*, LeBaron and Pillay, have indicated that "Culture and conflict constantly shape and reshape each other in an evolving interactive process" (2006:7). The corollary of the interface between culture and class struggle is how to acquire power for the dominance as well as possible oppression of other classes in society. Of note, in this study, there are basically two classes or worlds: the man's world and the woman's world. This Manichean nature of power relations finds testimony in fierce, unabated power play in gendered social space. The attempts to curb the political, social, cultural and economic scrapes engendered by patriarchal arrangement and to liberate women from this mould of practice have given rise to feminist ideology and aesthetics in Nigeria and the world over. It is under this rubric that

Anthills of the Savannah is significant. In apprehending the essence of this study, it is appropriate to know that ideology is imperative in deconstructing the edifice of patriarchal framework that supports the oppression of women. In this regard, Udumukwu adroitly describes the historicity of feminist deconstruction of patriarchy: "...feminism... is animated by a desire to reconstruct history in order to reconstitute the woman as subjects. This implies that women are presented or represented not as a mere object of history, put at the margin" (2007b:7). Moreover, the feminist deconstructionist movement implies a set of strategies, which resonate with feminist power play to alter the calculus of power relations in postcolonial Nigeria. Thus, Helen Chukwuma's terse statement is pertinent here – this project is "to strategically transform gender relation in Nigeria" (Udumukwu 2007a:135).

In enervating Negritudinal, patriarchal system – an attempt Rose Mezu calls "the will to change" (1994: 217), it is needful to underscore that this is not merely a historical assignment: it is largely ideological. This is because the relationship between literature and ideology spans the continuum of history. Literature and ideology are in a soulful, interleaved relationship. Thus, "Literature espouses ideology and is mobilised in the internecine ideological struggles that [re]constitutes and [re]defines society in its [re]engineering processes" (James 2006: 411). And in turn, ideology mediates literature – and it is markedly inherited in its architecture. Both are essentially interlocked in a kind of dialectical interface. This is what defines power formations in every conceivable class, space or struggle. Louis Althusser describes ideology as *interpellation*, which is integral in the processual rites of the formation of subjectivity in the intricate ideological representation, and the giving of roles to ideological categories. It is also considered as "the systematic analysis of ideas and sensations, of their generation, combination and consequences" (Thompson 1992: 29). It is therefore that which determines the nature, pattern and consequences of power relations in a social milieu. This is in the main the debate which informs the Marxist architectural metaphor of base and superstructure.

The base is the economic (materialist) structure, the main foundation with the forces of productions on which the superstructural edifice and as its apparatuses of aesthetics (literature), philosophy, religion, law, politics and customs, among others rest. The superstructure utilises these elements which it is constitutive of to further its ideological hegemony over the proletarian class or to advance its thesis of ruler-subject dichotomy. Thus, ideology is a moderating instrument for the legitimisation of economic domination, state violence, hierarchised social space and above all sexual discrimination, which Žižek specifically referred to in his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, as "ideological violence". (9) In ensuring the inevitability of ideological supremacy, the class at the hierarchy uses "coercion and hegemony"

(Dirks 1994: 4). This is the case in *Anthills of the Savannah*, where the protagonist, Sam (His Excellency) and his coteries rely heavily on brute force and hegemonic control to perpetuate their regime as well as demand obedience from the people.

Therefore, this study's emphasis on ideology is because it is used by the powerful class as an emblem for the commodification of class relation as well as oppression. Thus, Gramsci's advancement of cultural hegemony has so much in common with the theoretical framework of this discourse, which is predicated on cultural materialism.

In this regard therefore, the feminist cultural materialist aesthetics is informed and sustained by the dialectics of countering and challenging the materialist (economic) philosophy and hiatus created by class dichotomy, which patriarchy promotes. This is the colour of feminism Jennifer Wicke offers definition here:

A feminism that insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop ... materialist feminism avoids seeing this (gender hierarchy) as the effect of a single ... patriarchy and instead gauges the web of social and psychic relations that make up a material, historical moment. (1994: 751)

The materialist facet of feminist aesthetics is one of the fulcrums of this study: it is the main reason for social stratification as well as gender complex that percolates the trajectory of history. As history records, the seeming anthropocentric, peremptory logic of colonialism, was in the main ground on the anvil of capitalist (materialist) expansion of Europe (Lenin 1951: 99-100) and kneaded on the dough of cultural attrition. To this end, feminist aesthetics from the cultural materialist perspective, contends that power instead of being freely given or appropriated by a group, ought to be negotiated through economic interaction (Mills 2007: 49). Accordingly, Chidi Amuta has argued that

[...] society manifest itself in terms of definite classes, groups and formations in the process of the production and reproduction of the means and ends for their sustenance. Therefore, literary values are not very literary but derive from the class configuration of social totality. (1986: 39)

Following from the above, the deep-seated systemic oppression of humanity – particularly the women, as patriarchy espouses is largely a function of materialism, which Marxist ideology sees as the base that sustains the superstructure. In addition, in her *Women Questions: Essays for a Materialist Feminism*, Lise Vogel widens the ballpark of (cultural) materialist feminism, she asserts that it “sought to replace the

socialist tradition's theorising about the woman question with a materialist understanding of women's oppression" (1995: xi).

Therefore, this approach considers the "construction of a materialist analysis of culture informed by and responsive to the concerns of women..." (Landry and MacLean 1993: ix-x) Achebe's aesthetic preoccupation in *Anthills of the Savannah* is steeped in the philosophy of redeeming women from the postcolonial Nigerian trammels. Similarly, in *Achebe: New Perspectives*, Umelo Ojinmah contends that "Achebe believes that the time is now for the new nations of Africa to invoke the female principle..." (103); an ideological invocation is principally part of answering complex feminist question. This artistic sensibility in the novel crystallises in the characterisation of Beatrice, a major character in the novel. She exemplifies Achebe's commitment to giving meaning to womanhood as against what traditional values and arrangement offered. Through Beatrice's actions in the novel, it is understandable by extrapolation that she renounces the fact that women are restricted to mere mother-type role in the society (Bicknell 1990: 276). She is remarkably Achebe's first central female character in the novel. Beatrice Nwanyibuife is an independent woman. Her characterisation smacks of the balance that Okonkwo (in *Thing Fall Apart*) and other female characters lack in Achebe's earlier works. Achebe's aesthetic and ideological contributions to the whole arsenal of debates to rid our world of gender chauvinism - and to make it freer and more humane find accommodation in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Apart from the leadership question, political upheaval and anti-people culture in Kangan - an imaginary Nigerian state, the feminist question is very central to the artistic philosophy underpinning the craft of this novel. Feminist rhetoric explains and addresses the historically oppressed position of women in our society. The human society is *ab initio* patriarchal, which is organised around male dominance. Feminist theorists and writers, which include Achebe, have provoked debates through which women, the "other" sex, to use Beauvior's term, seek to challenge their oppression, marginalisation and dominance by their male counterparts. Gendered space creates a world in which power play flourishes - it is the opium of the ideology behind gendered society. Fundamental to this study is power play; its understanding is crucial in this investigation.

Power play is the process and system whereby strategic manoeuvre, usually adopted in political, ideological struggle, diplomacy and power struggle, based on the use or threatened use of power as a conduit for coercion and acquiescence. It aggregates a set of strategies that employs aggression and coercive approach to enforce obedience or compliance in a given social space. Central to power game is the appropriation of the paraphernalia of authority and the state

apparatuses, which make the chicanery employed by the political class in power relations, look constitutional and normative.

Theoretical Clarifications

Cultural materialism is the theoretical framework upon which this study is built. Attempts to negate the contradictions posed by gendered society as well as patriarchal sanctioned power relations in our world, is steeped in cultural resistance dialectics. This is so because culture is at the heart of the concept of gender identity and power play. As a theory, cultural materialism was first introduced by the American anthropologist, Martin Harris in his seminal work, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (1968). But the thesis was refurbished by the Welsh cultural theorist and leftist, Raymond Williams, as he incorporated it into literary criticism. Williams' *Marxism and Literature* (1977) laid the foundation for this ground-breaking literary and cultural approach. Cultural materialism is an attempt to bring to bear on that aspect of social existence – culture – that was considered by classical criticism to be less materialist (and even political) in scope. Right from the genesis of his preoccupation with what delineates cultural materialism in “Culture and Society” (1958) up to the pivotal 1973 essay “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, Williams was concerned with power, that is, with the problematic of determining it (Juan 1999: 3). Therefore, in Williams's perspective, the provenance of power (play) is lodged in cultural materialism. Thus, for Williams, cultural materialism “is the analysis of all forms of signification, including quite centrally writing, within the actual means and conditions of their production” (1984: 210). Put simply, cultural materialism is the materialist exploration of culture; it is a system through which social order is experienced, reproduced and communicated. In this light, cultural materialist philosophy argues that human existence and relations of power are a function of practical issues of earthly, material reality. In line with the concern of this study, cultural materialist examination is appropriate in apprehending as well as achieving our objective in this investigation, as we shall see presently.

There is a palpable narrative shift in Achebe's craft in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The paradigmatic shift in content and style reflects a literary commitment towards addressing the issues posed by women's thralldom in postcolonial Nigeria. Therefore, this shift in artistic presentation is a transition from gender disparity to equality, which is the hallmark of “...changing practical consciousness” (Williams 1997: 54); and this is the mainstay of Raymond Williams' premise in his theory of cultural materialism, a concept steeped in materiality and power play associated with cultural practices. As a political novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* dramatises Nigeria's politics of female subjugation, which is gauged by the catatonic state of women's economic state and social

immobility given the realities of oppressive, patriarchal practice and power play.

Theorising Power: Power, Achebe's Women, and (Cultural) Materialism

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the American feminist, Adrienne Rich, argues persuasively about the nuances of genderisation, which have relationship with the African gender relations and power acquisition; she remarkably describes patriarchy as:

The power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure – or through tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labour – men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male. (1977: 57-8)

On the heels of the above, the need for power acquisition in postcolonial Nigerian experience is precipitated by the material uncertainties of the times as well as the quest for domination. According to the Nigerian historian, Elizabeth Isichie in her book, *A History of the Igbo People*,

Times of great uncertainty ... seem to encourage materialism. Men try to attain the psychological security which the social context of their time denies them by creating a little charmed island for themselves. (1976: 149)

A construal of Isichie's "psychological security" above finds resonance in power acquisition and power play, which Wole Soyinka in his *Reith Lectures* (2004), refers to as "... the ancestral adversary of human freedom" (9). Psychological security is necessary for both sexes in gender relations – it is crucial for women to attain some measure of material balance, which affords psychological security. This is also a major source of power acquisition by women. And in the context of Soyinka's statement above regarding power, women's attainment of psychological security through materialist fulfilment and pursuits will inform balance and power necessary for countering men's subjugation and marginalisation of women in gender relations. Hence, psychological security – a spin-off of cultural materialism, furtively allocates power to men, while the women are subjected to thralldom resulting from this paradoxical enemy of human freedom.

Thus, in negating patriarchy, there is need to rethink power structure – by decentralising power across diverse social networks; this is the pivot of Foucauldian analysis of power. Thus for Foucault,

Power is dispersed across complicated and heterogeneous social networks marked by ongoing struggle. Power is not something present at specific locations within those networks, but is instead always at issue in ongoing attempts to (re) produce effective social alignments, and conversely to avoid or erode their effects, often by producing various counter-alignments. (Gutting 1994: 112-113)

Power decentralisation that brings about “counter-alignment”, to borrow Foucault’s term, is the meat of feminist discourse. In Fanon’s conceptualisation of power, this kind of counter-alignment resonates with “primary Manichaeism” (Fanon 1963: 39), an idea that makes a case for duality of powers or forces for “psycho-affective equilibrium” (169), a penumbra of Isichiean “psychological security”. Therefore, feminist discourse maintains that

Women have the capacity to ... have social resources that often enable them to survive, whether in material terms or in terms of psychological support... (Lemke 2003: 65)

Furthermore, the *raison d’être* for challenging the patriarchal paradigm that consigned power at one locus: the men’s world, galvanised this form of “narrative[s] of resistance” (Gikandi 1991: 26), which is amply demonstrated in the craft of *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Accordingly, in his *The Novel and Change in Africa*, Onyemaechi Udumukwu argues unequivocally in the same light that

[...] Chinua Achebe has not only adopted the appropriate discursive strategies in *Anthills of the Savannah* in order to project the nature of the existing power structures in a post-colonial context but in addition, he adopts such discursive strategies in order to subvert the existing power structure. (2006: 196)

In such feminist discourse, as delineated above, “the focus is not on uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as ‘powerless’ in a particular context” (Mohanty 1988: 200), but to demonstrate Achebe’s preoccupation with the burdens of traditional concept of power as it affects the women as well as a burlesque of this stifling practice, which needs subversion. Therefore,

In the beginning power rampaged through the world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power’s rude waist loincloth of peace and modesty. (Achebe 1987: 102)

Also, Achebe has ideo-aesthetically crafted a vision of women that ensconces motherhood as power. Thus, “*Nneka*, they said. Mother is supreme” (98). For Achebe, this kind of power is acquired through enlightenment and self-discovery as well as reconstruction of the primeval notion of motherhood. This is fleshed out in a dialogue between Ikem and Beatrice, as Ikem comes to shocking awakening that women should be given due recognition in the society as against the roles traditional institutions offered. He reads out his rethink on women to Beatrice:

The original oppression of women was based on crude denigration. She caused Man to fall. So she became a scapegoat. No, not a scapegoat which might be blameless but a culprit richly deserving of whatever suffering Man chose thereafter to heap on her... Well, that kind of candid chauvinism might be OK for the rugged state of the Old Testament. The New Testament required a more enlightened, more refined, more loving even, strategy – ostensibly, that is. (97-98)

According to Francis Waffet, what the strategy highlighted above necessitates in the postcolonial era is largely about “the awakening of critical consciousness”, which actually “leads the way to the expression of social discontents precisely because these discontents are real components of an oppressive situation” (Freire 1972: 16).

There is a rectilinear nexus between oppression of the masses in the postcolonial society and marginalisation, oppression and denigration of women in our gendered space: the former is the macrocosm of the latter. And to subvert this trend, identity consciousness is essential amongst the women folk. This will in the final analysis elicit change of gear in societal mobility of women – and the body politic. This is in sync with Ikem’s opinion about negating the trammels sired on women by the “Old Testament” (98). According to Richard Taylor, the negation of patriarchal arrangement, which is enshrined in identity consciousness, should be viewed as thus:

identity represents an evolving articulation of personal capacities, value identification and plans, ideals, expectations and opportunities. (1986: 202)

In silhouetting Achebe’s concept of women’s power, it should be considered as “... the ability to take one’s place in whatever discourse is essential to action...” (Heilbrun 1989:18) Consequently, in Achebe’s vision, theorising power for women in the postcolonial Nigeria, has to do with disavowing any essentialist logic; there should be approaches and strategies that will relay the sinews of knowledge and experience as well

as deconstructing the primal view of women to depict strength (Udumukwu 2007b: 18).

Also, such movement of liberation and re-creation of Nigerian (African) women, who are yoked by the pressures of traditional institutions, should entail a transition from the margin to the epicentre of affairs, rather than being “in the peripheral, tangential role of a passive victim of a masculine-based cultural universe” (Mezu1994: 27-8). The women’s transition from the margin to the epicentre of affairs, foregrounds placing them at the limelight. Beatrice sees this new reality as thus:

But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who picked up the spears abandoned by their defeated mensfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late! (91-2)

The State, Violence and Women: Feminist Resistance Narrative

The history of Nigerian State since political independence has been shaped and sustained by violence. The colonial administrative mechanism and structure underpin this logic. The imperial conquest was itself a classical case of violence and militarism. This development has largely forged Nigeria’s (Africa’s) political power architectonics and capitalism. It is also in this light that Nwachukwu-Agbada reasons: “It is equally clear that part of the colonial success in Africa is traceable to the military might of the colonising power” (2007: 85). As the colonialists left, they put in place a network of operation to further have a hold on the Nigerian nation as well as other African countries. This neo-colonial dominance theory is being advanced by the Nigerian political class in cahoots with the foreign compradors. In Kangan, the government in power is a military one, whose stock in trade is to use brute force and violence to sustain its structures. In addition, this regime came into existence through violence: coup d’état, even though it proclaimed at the beginning that it was going to be a corrective regime. The state in this instance is a sheer departure from the Weberian definition that considers it as a socio-political entity responsible for the enforcement of constitutional provisions. In the postcolonial state – as being foreshadowed in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the state has taken an unusual characteristic, which finds accommodation in violence and power play.

On top of this, the parthenogenesis of this metamorphosis by the state reaches its apogee in the materialist pursuit as well as class

domination by the wielders of power or “soldiers-turned politicians” (Achebe 1987: 141). According to Adele Jinadu in his *Fanon: In Search of African Revolution*, “the state is viewed as the agent for the furtherance of class interests, a function necessitated by the exigencies of the productive relations between a class of exploiters and a class of the exploited” (1980: 100). In view of this backcloth, most of the postcolonial states have been referred to as failed states or collapsed states. This inept and harrowing pattern is what Elewa’s uncle addresses here in the novel:

We have seen too much trouble in Kangan since the white man left because those who make plans make for themselves only and their family... I say, there is too much fighting in Kangan, too much killing. But fighting will not begin unless there is first a thrusting of fingers into eyes. (228)

In furtherance of the reasons outlined in the above snippet, the postcolonial Nigeria is a theatre of horror and psychological violence, which are built on the scaffold of class attrition and capitalist oppression. And again, the women are the worst hit in this kind of status quo, in view of the realities of patriarchy. Part of these realities is what Achebe sees as disillusionment resulting from the mess that the emergent Nigerian political class has made of self-rule and political independence (Ojinmah 1991: 107).

Coursing through this development, the Nigerian state has wielded a kind of monopoly of power and violence in order to accomplish its agenda of dominance and power.

Since independence, Nigeria has had to contend with issues of leadership and nation-building. The reason for this despicable landscape is easily fathomable, given her national terrain: a theatre of brutality, marginalisation and a place of state-sanctioned violence. In the main, this unwholesome pattern draws its source from the cruel and harsh living conditions of the masses (Mayowa 2001: 195). This has also elicited an asphyxiating form of struggle. In defining the terrain of this struggle, “which obviously extends the contest against capitalism not only to its economic foundation but to its cultural and ideological roots in everyday life” (Sachikonye 1995: 7-8), the state resorts to privatisation of violence and liberalisation of coercion. The nation of Kangan dramatises this as graphically illustrated by His Excellency’s characterisation in the novel as well as his coteries. Ideally, in every modern state, there should be an organised system and a constitutional order, which ultimately constitute a lodestar for the smooth operation of a nation. But the absence of this order naturally impinges on the socio-economic harmony and political operation of the society. Predominantly, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the mould of power relations between the military (political class) and the people (the women) mediates the ethos of

public and private morality in a society that is oblivious of its past and rather seeks material rewards in its future.

In all of Achebe's works before *Anthills of the Savannah*, there is a palpable aesthetics of violence – beginning with Okonkwo's beating of Ojiugo to other crude and violent treatment of women by men in other works. But there is an overt change of gear in *Anthills of the Savannah* – where Achebe envisions an idea of women which ensconces respect for the women as well as recognition of their identity. In this direction,

It should be noted that Achebe moves from the peripheral role women assume in the earlier novels to playing a central role in shaping and mediating the realms of power in *Anthills of the Savannah*... Beatrice is the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of socio-political schema... The portrayal of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of changing the course of female emancipation. (Fonchingong 2006: 45)

Here, the women are perceived as subjects, not mere objects in the society. The meat of Achebe's feminist narrative in the novel is to foreground women's subversion of man's ideals and institutionalised practices as well as educating the society about stopping violence meted to women. Some of this violence is largely psychological – a belief handed down from generation to generation. A clear illustration of the subversion of this patriarchal arrangement and violence is Beatrice's giving of Elewa's baby-girl's name. Two things are relevant in this ceremony. One the baby was named Amaechina – a male name; and secondly the ceremony was performed by a woman: Beatrice. These two variables question the legitimacy of man's supremacy in the society – made possible by psychological violence and patriarchal ideology. Beatrice and Abdul's statements on this occasion find resonance in the psychological negation of androgenic contradictions – which is a form of violence; a rebuttal to the time-worn violence meted to the “other” sex. She contends:

What does a man know about a child anyway that he should presume to give it a name... Nothing except that his wife told him he is the father (222)

Power Play and “Nwanyibuife” Dialectics: Negating Androgynous Contradictions

Through history, there seems to be no substitute for the denigrated people and the invidious gendered world presented in Kangan – a simulacrum of Nigeria – except the alternative of what Theodor Adorno calls negation. In Adorno’s thesis, art (literature) and ideology realise themselves quite full well not in what they demonstrate as positive, but in what is made bear through the decomposition and negation of what has been taken as the norm (Adorno 1974: 126-7). Therefore, the craft of “Nwanyibuife” is to undermine the primal, patriarchal world-view. This dovetails with Helen Chukwuma’s idea about the essence of new women, which is enshrined in the philosophy of feminism. Thus, feminism “... seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being...” (1994: xiii). There is a distillation of this during the naming ceremony of Elewa’s baby-girl, Amaechina. Beatrice’s actions in this event – by presiding over the ceremony and naming the child herself as well as the male-type name she gave to the girl, culminate in deconstructing the patriarchal paradigm; this sees the women as “ife” – something. It is against this background that

Beatrice has decided on a sudden inspiration to hold a naming ceremony in her flat for Elewa’s baby-girl. She did not intend a traditional ceremony... There was an Old Testament prophet who named his son The-remnant-shall-return. They must have lived in times like this. We have a different metaphor, though; we have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child Amaechina: May-the-path-never-close. Ama for short. (217-222)

The context of the above excerpt is two-pronged: first it points to de-genderisation of names, which obviates the trauma of male chauvinism and secondly, Beatrice’s role in the event referred to above shows that social roles are man-made; they are *interpellated*, to use Althusser’s term. These two events are what Udumukwu calls “double reversal” (2007a: 323). The mainstay of these developments is lodged in Achebe’s artistic faithfulness to upturn feminist agitation – for a more social inclusive society. And Beatrice’s political answer to the elders’ question: “who gave her the name?”, makes room for a democratic system, which is populist; she intoned: “All of us” (225). The aesthetic fervour of this statement is couched in feminist subterfuge to negate male domination.

By extrapolation, here lies the fact that negating androgynous contradictions amounts to “low-power distance”, as enunciated by the Dutch organisational anthropologist, Geert Hofstede. In his power distance theory, power distance amounts to the degree of acceptance and deference of unequal power, which exists between people or classes

(LaBaron and Pillay 2008: 46). Low-power distance makes a case for democratic order. This is in the main, one of the cardinal tenets of feminism. In addition, apart from the equitable and gender-blind society that Achebe envisions in *Anthills of the Savannah*, there is also a recrudescence of women power and support, which are needed for society to gain balance and purpose. Chikwenye Ogunyemi's statement adds credence to this negation of machismo evident in Kangan. She asks: "is it any wonder that the country is in shambles when it has failed to solicit the help of its better half (women) ... for pacific pursuits, for the betterment of the country?" (1988: 60).

Morphologically, "Nwanyibuife" is constitutive of triadic entities (morphemes). By transliteration, "nwanyi" means "woman"; the second is "bu", meaning "is"; while the third morpheme is 'ife', and this means "something". Creatively, this word has aesthetic, linguistic, ideological and political undertones. It is largely a form of Achebe's response to some critics (and possibly) readers, who might have accused him of overt romanticisation or palpable feminisation of his female characters in his earlier works. Furthermore, this aesthetic, ideological characterisation crystallises in Beatrice, Achebe's symbol of contemporary womanhood. Her persona in the novel evokes sense of renewed and liberated womanhood – a departure from the marooned and exploited women of the old. Beatrice is more than a character in *Anthills of the Savannah*; she exemplifies the image of a new Nigeria – and a new world, where gender equality, human rights and socio-economic stability will hold sway. Herein lies the essence of her baptismal name: Nwanyibuife – meaning "A female is also something" (87) in guaranteeing societal cohesion and development.

Part of the evils of Nigerian postcolonial society is the furtherance of the logic of social attrition and class war; these two variables are largely sustained by the gendered African (Nigerian) traditional set-up, which are a corollary of her cultural experience. And in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe maintains that to surmount this social anomie, the feminist question needs to be part of the debates regarding arresting the malaise in Nigeria, so as to effect wholesome change in the polity. Following this, Udumukwu has argued that "Achebe's re-visioning especially in the positive image conferred on women marks a willingness to espouse change" (2007a: 311). What could be taken away from this instance is Achebe's artistic commitment to the politics of feminist narrative that advances the cause of women in Nigeria, and on the African continent. So, in power play discourse, the nature and texture of power women wielded as daughters and individuals in their biological homes have been remarkably radicalised in their remade social status as new women expressed in their wifely roles as well as in their activities in the larger society (Chukwuma 2007: 135).

In the Hegelian construct, Nwanyibuife ideo-aesthetically amounts to “antithesis”, which literally translates to negation of the “thesis” – that is the contradictions in the postcolonial Nigerian social space. And within the confines of this investigation, these contradictions manifest mainly in the gendered, patriarchal arrangement of the postcolonial Nigerian society. The interface of these two variables is a correlative of “synthesis” – which largely entails Achebe’s progressive social vision of postcolonial Nigerian society. Accordingly, in his *Social Responsibility in the Nigerian Novel*, Udumukwu argues insightfully in this direction: “from a dialectical point of view these contradictions are materials that must be negated for society to evolve a new order” (1998:43).

Therefore, in adopting the Nwanyibuife schema, the essence is to assert the place of a new woman through feminist rhetoric against the pristine concept of womanhood as being weak, marooned, unrepresented and oppressed. Thus, in the Achebean sense, the Nwanyibuife aesthetics is lodged in feminist power play and negation battle waged in the socio-economic and politico-cultural turfs of the society, which is *prima facie* patriarchal and disempowering of women. Basically, societal realisation of women’s inherent strength and true worth will shape the quest for women’s recognition as well as liberate them from patriarchal, cultural materialist thralldom; it will equally galvanise a rethink of the contribution of the oppressed in the development of the Nigerian nation. It is on this strength that we come to terms with the import of this statement in the novel that “this world belongs to the people of the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented” (232).

Conclusion

It is pertinent to restate at this point that the issues of power play and gendered universe as argued in this study are thereby inconceivable without the inscriptions and mediations of cultural materialist criticism. In enervating the social atrophy engendered by patriarchal tenets, it is essential to incorporate cultural materialist criticism, which shores up feminist rhetoric – and this is integral in occluding the pristine, traditional concept of women as culturally and economically disempowered. At the root of cultural materialist theory lies the arsenal to effect change in our world; a change necessitated by the political, social, ideological and economic subjugation of women, made possible by the logic of patriarchy as well as mercantiled power relations, which represses the masses.

Therefore, it is within the ballpark of cultural materialist study that it could be stated that the national discontents highlighted in the novel transcend the confines of fiction; they are reified in the lived world – as seen in the realities of postcolonial Nigeria. It is on this score that *Anthills of the Savannah* is a piece of fiction centred on power play in the gendered postcolonial Nigeria, where women have been kept at the zero

level for a long time. Consequently, to move Nigeria forward, cultural materialist approach is crucial, as it will help to illuminate our vision and goal towards re-writing the dehistoricised account of the oppressed – the women, particularly in the cultural and socio-economic spheres. This is basically one of Chinua Achebe's artistic preoccupations in the novel. The patriarchal tendency to de-emphasise women's true worth and the historical damage done to their rights and power have been given expression in Sheila Rowbotham's *A Century of Women*: "Women's history has been part of a pervasive impulse ..." (1997:3). Besides, cultural materialist study will equally contribute in rescuing the postcolonial Nigeria from the rubbles of patriarchal pillage and purblind subjectivities.

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