

Nationhood and Women in Postcolonial African Literature

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**Abstract:** In their article "Nationhood and Women in Postcolonial African Literature" Elda Hungwe and Chipu Hungwe, through an analysis of Pepetela's *Mayombe*, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* discuss nationhood and nation in postcolonial African literature within the framework of the postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory negates master narratives of nation and nationhood, hence it deconstructs such narratives as problematic. Hungwe and Hungwe discuss problems associated with definitions of nation where groups or members are peripheralized. While Hungwe and Hungwe acknowledge that nationalism served a critical role during decolonization, their conclusion is that in postcolonial Africa notions of nation and nationhood represent problematic issues with regard to ethnicity and gender and that globalization in particular impacts and challenges the notion of nation and nationhood.

## **Elda HUNGWE and Chipo HUNGWE**

### **Nationhood and Women in Postcolonial African Literature**

We begin our analysis with the novel *Mayombe* by Artur Carlos Maurício Pestana dos Santos aka Pepetela. Portrayed in *Mayombe* is a diverse mix of people who consider themselves a nation. There are different ethnic groups, the Kikongo, Kimbundu, and Umbundu and it is nationalist ideology which serves their emotional coherence. *Mayombe*, however, suggests that sharing the same history of colonialism is not the same as sharing the same identity. What unites loosely the freedom fighters during the fight for independence is nationalist ideology and this is what coheres the fighters to achieve freedom for Angola. For example, the figure Struggle assumes mistakenly that after the war there will be peace while Fearless believes that even after the war contradictions arising out of human nature will continue and ethnic differences threatens the struggle for independence. Thus they do not trust the Commander, Fearless, as he is Kikongo while they are Kimbundu. In the struggle to transform the colonized space, the wealth of ethnic cultures is found to be both distracting and hard to absorb, hence the attraction to tribalism (see Davidson). Tribalism is portrayed as a dangerous yet realist ideology which threatens the success of national consciousness. For example, when the Commander asks for volunteers to look for Muatianvua when he did not show, "no one wants to volunteer because Muatianvua is detribalized. Were he Kikongo or Kimbundu, four or five would soon have come forward" (*Mayombe* 34). Thus nationalism becomes problematic as an artificial construct against the established paradigm of tribalism. There is no homogeneous African identity and thus the question of how competing voices could be harmonized becomes relevant in the processes of reactive and proactive measures (on this, see Tarmer).

Another problem highlighted in *Mayombe* with regards to the creation of nation and the problematics of nationalism is the diversity of missions because the freedom fighters tend to embark on personal missions in the name of nation. Nationalist ideology suggests that all are fighting for liberation but then the question arises, "whose liberation?" For example, the Operations Chief is fighting in Cabinda so that his own territory would have few enemies. Theory's mission is to find acceptance in a world where racial and ethnic hybrids are not recognized. *Mayombe's* narrative on the construction of nation expounds on the paradigm of nation which is conceived as a unified and culturally homogeneous entity formed around an ethnic core (see Smith). The figure of Theory brings this perspective into play in that his commitment to the struggle is not so much of a developed inner consciousness; rather, it is a result of an external driving force. He first defines himself by where he comes from to legitimize his cause, he acknowledges that he is a colored and as such he is suffering an identity crisis: "I carry in me the irreconcilable and that is my driving force" (*Mayombe* 1). His mission is to find acceptance in a world where racial hybrids are not recognized and his solution is to join the guerillas. Theory is challenging racism especially in as far as nation building is concerned. This element destroys the essential sameness of the people and by fighting on the side of blacks, Theory is proving a point that color difference does not matter, he is demystifying race to prove that what must be regarded as a parameter of national identity is not race and that identity must be equal to shared consciousness. The problem is that not all guerillas accept this shared consciousness. He, therefore, is prepared to endure physical and spiritual pain and even death, fighting for Angola and its people and hence his refusal to return to the base to recover his injured knee. He has made a choice to abandon his family in order to prove his identity.

Pepetela's argument is that there is a need to transcend ethnic boundaries of the homogeneous nature of the definition of nation from a Western point of view. At the same time, he stresses the idea of nation as being important in the fight against colonialism. Thus, Pepetela emphasizes the importance of nationalism against individualism as reflected by the symbol of "The Mulberry tree" where Fearless sees: "A giant mulberry tree in front. The trunk is distinguished from the forest's syncretism but if I let my eyes follow the trunk up, its foliage merges in the general foliage and is again part of the syncretism. Only the trunk is distinct, is individual. Such is Mayombe, the giants are such only in part, at the level of the trunk the rest is lost in the mass. Such is man" (182). Here we have a picture of a society which is made up of individual units where individual members of society are equivalent to the giant mulberry tree. The picture of nation portrayed demonstrates the value of the syncretism of

the collective brought about by Fearless's death. He is buried together with Struggle in the same pit which reflects that a commander and a soldier are one in a revolution. The death of Fearless leads to the development of a nationalist consciousness that transcends barriers of narrow tribalism and individualism which ultimately results in the formation of a nation where individuals participate as a collective.

In addition to the above described matters of nation and nationhood narrated in the novel, the matter of gender presents a further problematic issue. Ondine, a female figure in the text represents the Angolan nation. Her relationship with other characters implies that Angola cannot be liberated with theoretical propositions alone but only when they are put into action. As a woman, Ondine not only symbolizes Angola but also Africa whose virginity has already been devastated by colonial forces throughout history. The fact that she does not enjoy sex is a pointer to the fact that a nation does not enjoy or is not satisfied by theories only but practice by leaders and this point is portrayed in sexual imagery. Deep down she loves the Commissioner, but this love is not consummated. Fearless, on the other hand, represents pragmatism and he manages to fulfill Ondine sexually. Pepetela's novel makes nationalism appear an exclusively male pre-occupation whereas women's lives are said to center elsewhere. The liberation movement in *Mayombe* consists of men while females are seen to play minor roles such as teaching. Nation and nationhood appears in the novel specifically men's prerogative and it is men who are associated with the notions of liberation, colonialism, and nationalism.

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* contains reflection on how the above referred to aspects of masculinity promote corruption, selfishness, and greed which in turn foster bad governance and the denial of rights, as well as military coups and thus Achebe's novel negates the concept nation. The novel is set in a fictional West African state called Kangan ruled by a dictatorial president with a military background. He rules the country with a tight grip and a corrupt government. In *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe is re-writing his earlier *A Man of the People* with a gendered perspective and thus Achebe shows evolvement with regard to the question of nation and nationhood also from the above described perspective of gender. The problematic of the African tradition of masculinity which fosters the marginalization and subordination of women is expressed in the novel by the male figure Braimoh who says "so I think our tradition is fault there" (23) and another figure, Beatrice, challenges male chauvinism when she says "that every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinism bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like the Women's Lib (88). Speaking through his alter ego Ikem, Achebe acknowledges that the malaise Africa is experiencing results from excluding women from the scheme of things. Thus, with Beatrice, Achebe projects a new vision of women's roles and clarifies Ikem's hazy thoughts on the issue. Ikem accepts that his former attitude towards women has been too respectful, too idealist. Through Beatrice, Achebe strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women especially since the social conditions which have kept women down in the past era are now largely absent. Urbanization and education have combined to broaden women's horizons. Achebe's newly envisioned female's roles are to be expanded, articulated and secured by women themselves, and the modern African woman is doing just that. Beatrice inhabits the postcolonial world of Kangan as a senior assistant secretary in the Ministry of Finance and the only person in the service with a first class honors degree in English and thus represents a small minority of women in a lopsided system in which African men receive a well-rounded education while women receive only utilitarian cosmetic skills (on this, see, e.g., Mezu). And Beatrice earns the respect of her male counterparts and joins the revolutionary elite combating the oppression inflicted by military dictatorship. Beatrice fractures the paradigm of masculinity and she represents a counter narrative.

Achebe's view of women is also reflected through the names Nwanyibuife (A Female is also Something) and Amaechina (May the Path never Close) and Achebe's vision is that women are equal stakeholders in the building of nation as are men. Women are portrayed as contributors to politics and who come to the forefront towards political and socio-economic recovery. For Achebe, women represent new hope for the transformed world of Kangan and may even take over as fathers and husbands. After all, Beatrice replaces men and takes over the ritual of naming of Amaechina and one protagonist declares that in the gathering led by Beatrice she has put the world "where it should sit" (*Anthills of the Savannah* 227). Achebe shows in his novel that women will be forerunners in the journey towards recovery with the youth, workers, and peasants as trusted lieutenants. Achebe's vision is the inclusion

of all social classes in matters of the state with women on the forefront on the road to freedom. In contrast, men are presented as a fragmented lot who jostle each other to win favor with the dictator against the preferable scene of women in solidarity. *Anthills of the Savannah* exposes the problematics of masculinity in postcolonial Africa whose leaders through military governance are associated with the model of the warrior.

The problematics of globalization are narrated in conjunction with the situation of women in wa Thiong'o Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. When a persistent drought threatens the survival of the village's residents, the character Karega suggests a delegation travel to Nairobi to appeal for assistance from their member of parliament and Ngugi uses the delegation's reception in Nairobi to reveal the hypocrisy of various elite-run institutions in postcolonial Kenya. For example, a church leader, Jerrod Brown, offers the group mere spiritual support, the educational leader Chui is entertaining a select crowd and cannot be bothered assisting poor villagers, and wealthy businessman Kimeria holds some members of the delegation hostage while raping a woman named Wanja. After the Ilmorog delegation village to Nairobi, the narrative relates destruction brought to the village by progress owing to increasing intrusion from the city, the church, the establishment of a police station, the African economic bank, and, eventually a highway and the new Ilmorog becomes a town complete with all urban vices. Ngugi's understanding of "development" is criticism of universalism and wants the local to maintain its relevance (on the importance of literature in African languages, see, e.g., Ilo <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/2>>). For example, when Wanja allows herself to be attracted by Western values and in consequence becomes a prostitute, she reclaims her beauty and dignity only after returning to be a peasant at the end. She represents the link between the present and past of the local against the global. She even teaches the people of Ilmorog how to brew Theng'eta, an inspirational drink to remain connected to their past. This is not easy: one of the characters of the novel, Nderi, turns Theng'eta into a commercial brew getting the sole license to produce it himself. Similarly, the elite of the village/town such as Chief Nanga, are never in touch with their people and live in wealth with spacious houses and expensive cars. Nanga for example wants the highway to run through the village because he purchased ten buses in anticipation of accumulating wealth. In Ngugi's novel globalization exploits, denigrates, and humiliates Africa in the same way slavery and colonialism did in the past. The character Nderi, for example, represents the corruption and greed of Kenya's political, economic, and social elite who, after the struggle for freedom from British rule, have not returned the wealth of the land to its people but commit instead social injustice and contribute to economic inequality. Some of the effects of globalization are emphasized when one character, Odili, says that "a man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors the whole time. The trouble with our new nation as I saw it then ... was that none of us had been indoors long enough to be able to say to hell with it. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday" (37). He goes on to talk about how a handful of his group of people become the smart and the lucky and how they had scrambled to the one shelter their former rulers left and taken it over. The above metaphor is powerful and the point is that a person who goes from having nothing to having everything is going to be more reluctant to go back to having nothing, compared to someone that has had everything the whole time, thus making him more greedy to gain power and more defensive against giving up his power.

The novel's narration of timber exploitation by the forces of globalization leads to the decrease of agricultural productivity in turn leading to poverty and drought. Attempts by the people of Ilmorog to challenge the inhuman and mindless capitalist wastage of their environment and tradition through a series of protests and attacks on these forces have been smothered by the state's coercive instruments. Clearly, Africans have to empower themselves to repossess their own development and this is to be done by fighting corruption and by insisting on their own cultural preferences (see Ake). In *Petals of Blood* Munira, Karega, Abdullah, and Wanja were on the forefront in challenging these exploiters who were benefiting at the expense of the peasants. Ngugi suggests in his novel to question the concept of nation and that all certainties about it should now be suspect. He confronts globalization as a threat to integrity since nationalism places a nation at the centre of its concerns and seeks to promote national autonomy, national unity, and national identity (see Smith; with reference to Africa specifically, see, e.g., Asante-Darko <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss4/2>>). While the appeal of

the notion of nation still prevails, there ought to be more effective ways to maintain the integrity and welfare of the community (see Emenyonu).

In conclusion, we argue that the notion and application of the concept of nation is infested with acute weaknesses which stem from the definition itself. The nation-state in Africa emerged in different circumstances and the concept was invested with the varied aspirations, needs, and longings of a people struggling to throw off years of colonial domination. In the case of African countries the apparatus of the nation was thus more than simply the structure of the state; it was linked to the myths, symbols, and religious lore of pre-colonial communities, as well as their shared memories and their expectations of generations. However, while globalization makes political borders increasingly irrelevant as it transcends mental as well as physical barriers, there are also solid reasons why the nation-state continues to be a key actor in establishing the economic, political, and social conditions necessary for growth and for attracting foreign capital. Therefore, the appeal of nationhood is far from diminishing. Anthony Giddens's definition of a nation and nationhood is problematic as people cannot rely wholly on collective identity because the notion itself does not even encompass the whole of humanity. In Pepetela's *Mayombe* it is emphasized that common imagination can tie people together and that actual interaction resulting from togetherness can engender moral obligations. Following colonization, Africans adopted national consciousness in order to fight for liberation and this led to most African countries to realize their freedom and self determination. Nationhood is being threatened and undermined as the world becomes a global village that makes political borders irrelevant and this is reflected in the novels we analyze in the article at hand. Further, increased interconnectedness has brought the spread of global ideas, images, and commodities. Thus, sovereignty is threatened as national governments become insignificant and are also no longer the principal form of authority and transnational actors now play the more important roles in global politics. The idea of nationalism is now being compromised as there is an influx of movement of people across borders. At the same time, globalization has become a threat to the poor rather than an opportunity for global actions to eradicate poverty. In the novels analyzed the concepts of nation and nationhood — which purports to engage everyone in the same way with the same degree of intensity — the perspectives of community, nation, and gender are narrated in a manner of a sense of question and suspicion. This perspective is particularly the focus of Pepetela's *Mayombe* where the writer reflects on nationalism as a male domain to the detriment of society. And Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* tries to de-masculinize the nation and reveals the corruption, selfishness, and greed associated with the masculine leadership that excludes their feminine counterparts. Thus, the nation is portrayed as thriving better if women are involved as equal members in decision making. We also find evidence in the texts analyzed that although the appeal of the concept of nation continues to be regarded by many as normal and inevitable features of social life, the existence of multicultural societies raises profound questions about the continuing relevance of ideas of cultural homogeneity. This is reflected by cultural and ethnic conflicts in *Mayombe* and reveal the temporality of nationalism in assuming nationhood showing that nationalism is subject to continual renegotiation and reflection. In sum, we advocate that in Africa contributions to society including leadership and decision making ought to occur according to the abilities of individuals and as such they are variable and that there is need to transcend ethnic, social, and gender boundaries.

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