Chapter 5

"If she writes, let her write the truth about us!"¹

Challenging Western Anthropology

The anthropologist . . . does not find things; s/he makes them. And makes them up. The structure is therefore not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person's way of handling realities . . . ²

- Trinh T. Minh-ha

The Western anthropologist, in writing up a culture, which is a result of her/his "constructing" the culture s/he goes to "study," claims to produce—what s/he calls—a "scientific" reading of the culture, its beliefs, norms, even the folklores.³ And, in doing so, s/he has to be well aware of the fact that the text which emanates must conform to the beliefs and conventions of thoughts of "her/his own" people, of "her/his own" country. The anthropologist's "study" is therefore, structured on her/his perception of reality from the position of her/his own cultural worldview. This tendency to approach diverse cultures, preserving the veil of superiority of the Western culture—during the colonial era—has led to the objectification of other cultures, instigating an ever-widening fissure between the West and the postcolonial countries of the world.⁴ This chapter questions certain notions nurtured by Western anthropologists, in examining certain issues in Echewa's novel I Saw the Sky Catch Fire.
Cross-cultural encounters between the West and the colonized parts of the world— during the period of colonial rule—has rarely left out a space for the once-colonized people to express their voice. Western anthropologists and ethnographers have been convinced of certain “core elements in a definition of humanity in comparison with which the much more numerous cultural particularities are of clearly secondary importance” (Geertz 39). Geertz talks about the propensity to consider certain cultural traits as universal, and therefore judge other cultures according to those specificities:

The notion of a *consensus gentium* (a consensus of all mankind)—the notion that there are some things that all men will be found to agree upon as right, real, just, or attractive and that these things are, therefore, in fact right, real, just, or attractive—was present in the Enlightenment and probably has been present in some form or another in all ages and climes... [This approach] demands (1) that the universals proposed be substantial ones... (2) that they be specifically grounded in biological, psychological, or sociological processes... (3) that they [are]... core elements in a definition of humanity...

Rather than studying cultural particularities, the *consensus gentium* approach “moves away from them” (Geertz 39). The diverse cultures and civilizations of the colonized have thus been considered inferior to those of the West, as they fail to conform to the universal notions of cultural traits put up by Western anthropologists. There has not been an attempt to “understand” other cultures, but to judge them from a Western ethnocentric perspective. What Western anthropologists write in their ethnographic accounts of a particular place is
“the concrete logic of what their countries (and perhaps they themselves) do in their relations with the Third World . . .” (Asad 148).

Ngũgĩ points out how the rise of anthropology in the eighteenth century had its impact on “the history of ideas, including the Enlightenment” (32). He writes that: “Enlightenment, after all, assumes darkness as its other. And the darker the other, the more visible and luminous the light from the European stars” (32). The anthropologist “constructs” the culture under study from a eurocentric perspective, and writes up a culture in her/his text which is very different from the culture s/he goes to “study.” Rarely does one find a desire on the anthropologist’s part to “understand” the culture without the lens of eurocentrism. Instead, there is a tendency to “study,” with a lens of objectification, “observing” and “theorizing” about the cultural norms of a group of people. This happens due to “the tendency to look at literature and the languages of its birth in terms of hierarchy, the notion that some languages and cultures are inherently of a higher order than others;” which Ngũgĩ considers to be an obstacle to “gloalectic reading” (60). Therefore, such civilizational encounters fail to create a space for dialogue; as Dallmayr writes: “Cultural interaction does not always occur in the ‘space of dialogue’ ” (“Dialogue Community”). In Echewa’s novel *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, there is a questioning of this absence of dialogue, and a challenging of Western ethnocentric perspective.

*I Saw the Sky catch Fire*—a sequel to *The Crippled Dancer*—oscillates between two time-frames: Nne-nne’s narrative and other incidents in 1959, and an account of Aba Women’s War in 1929. This chapter focuses on Nne-nne’s narrative regarding Ashby-Jones, and the Aba Women’s War. The other issues are dealt with in the next chapter. Western ethnographic view of considering African ways of life as primitive and untouched by
civilization, objectifying African men and women, is challenged when a white woman anthropologist, Elizabeth Ashby-Jones interrogates Igbo women, and in return, she herself is questioned by indigenous women, about European ways of life and customs. The lens of being observed is turned back on her. Rajender Kaur highlights this aspect, and comments that: “The text subverts the ethnocentric perspective by turning the critical gaze back on western women in having the Igbo women who are being questioned ask Elizabeth Ashby-Jones questions in return. Thus, they constantly resist being objectified...” (2).

There has always been this propensity to objectify non-West cultures and their religious practices and beliefs, during the colonial period. The Western anthropologist has to be “profoundly glued on ‘scientific objectivity’ as methodological goal;” (Minh-ha 55) and in being objective, in detaching oneself from the culture s/he goes to study, the anthropologist constructs a text based on her/his observation, study, examination, thereby treating people and cultures as objects. Anthropology aims to study man; but the question remains: Is it studying men/women as fellow human beings, with an eye of appreciation for the distinctive traits of other cultures? Or is it being judgmental, studying them as objects, as a group of people whose cultures and ways of life are considered subjugated to that of the anthropologist? Is there an attempt to understand the diverse cultural customs with respect towards them; or are they viewed with the lens of “observation” and “examination,” in such a manner that it is not a culture or a group of people under “study,” but some lifeless specimens placed under the microscope of the anthropologist’s lens, who then writes up a report conforming to the scientific rules put forth by her/his country?
In *I Saw the Catch Fire*, the objectifying gaze of Ashby-Jones is challenged. However, the manner in which Igbo women question her, does not carry an intention to objectify her and her culture. In this context, it is significant to draw one’s attention to the incomprehensibility of white women towards African women, during colonial rule. The novel, in interrogating the approach of Western anthropology to the diverse cultures of the Third World (during the colonial era), also raises questions about the insensitivity of feminist studies originated in the West to the women of the Third World. However, here is not merely an attempt to question the derogatory gaze of the ethnographer, but the encounter between Igbo women and Ashby-Jones is studied in intricate details, whereby the gaze also turns upon certain native traditions.

It is through Nne-nne’s (grandmother) narration that Echewa reveals the insensitive approach of Ashby-Jones towards Igbo women, uncovering the gap among women belonging to two different races: “... the novel’s intriguing chapter on ethnography entitled ‘Woman to Woman: Ughala and Elizabeth Ashby-Jones’ focuses on the race-gender divide as it figures in colonial relations, disrupting the effects of the ‘female universal’ (*Ndom*) ...” (Brodzki 213). Nne-nne narrates to Ajuzia the moments of interaction between the village women and Ashby-Jones, and thereafter the Aba War where she has been an active participant in taking the white woman as hostage. It is through Nne-nne’s words that one gains an idea about the importance of *Ndom* or women’s solidarity in Igbo culture, and which actually works as an effective agency to question back the white woman, and later revolt against British tax imposition; as Brodzki writes: “It is *Ndom*, the grandmother tells her grandson, that sustains and empowers Nigerian women, and it was solidarity that made it
possible for the women of southeastern and coastal Nigeria, at great risk to their lives, to make war against the British tax offensive in 1929” (211).

Nne-nne engages in an intergenerational transmission of histories related to Igbo society, to Ajuzia, the only descendant of their family—histories where she has played a significant role in preserving the dignity of Ndom—with an attempt to preserve stories from being wiped out. It is not a story of her own, but that of Ndom; how women challenged the imposition of tax by colonizers, how they fought bravely, how they questioned the objectifying gaze of the anthropologist: “Nne-nne’s testimony was not about herself, though, but about Oha Ndom, the Solidarity of Women” (I Saw 5).

The purpose of arrival of the white anthropologist, Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, was a matter of mystery for Igbo women. However, she was embraced by Igbo women as a “Fellow Woman”: “They were especially pleased, the address said, that a fellow woman had come to visit them, that they could address her as ‘Nwanyi ibem,’ or Fellow Woman, and that she could understand their grief” (91). But Ashby-Jones, with her lens of ethnocentrism, fails to “understand” the culture of Igbo people, their beliefs and practices; and instead develops a condescending attitude towards them, as is well evident in the notes she has been continuously taking in her diary; such as, describing their physical features, she writes:

... Generally flat, with a short, wide nose without bridge; flared nostrils; thick Negroid lips, with no noticeable hue. . . . They stare at you with a bored, droll, almost sheepish and unintelligent look, except that they appear studious and knowing. What one senses is not unintelligence or drollness but detachment and indifference. . . . they may be afflicted by a peculiar type of
tribal strabismus, which seems to enable them to see more than one of whatever that are looking at, and perhaps like those reptiles which can rotate each eye independently, they may see you from more than one perspective, each picture on a different screen of their dark minds. . . . (104-105)

Despite being designated by native women as “Nwanyi Ihem” or “Fellow Woman,” Ashby-Jones maintains her position of authority as a colonizer, and fails to apprehend Igbo customs. Her encounter with the village women is more of a “study,” than of understanding and respect towards them; as has been mostly the case with Western anthropologists during the colonial era.

An anthropologist—engaging in fieldwork—“experiences the indigenous environment and lifeways for oneself” (Pratt 32). S/He “even plays some roles, albeit contrived ones, in the daily life of the community. But the professional text to result from such an encounter is supposed to conform to the norms of a scientific discourse whose authority resides in the absolute effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject” (Pratt 32). Asad too points out the fact that anthropologists “must write up ‘their people,’ and they must do so in the conventions of representation already circumscribed . . . by their discipline, institutional life, and wider society” (159). Mary Louise Pratt questions the gap intentionally maintained by the anthropologist—during the colonial era—with the culture s/he goes to study, deliberately conforming to the protocols maintained by the West, and developing a lens of superciliousness in the study of other people with varied cultural norms.
In the novel also, one finds how Ashby-Jones maintains a distance from Igbo women, “studying” their customs with an outsider’s point of view, objectifying them and taking a contemptuous stance. Thus, she fails to understand their culture and ways of life, and rules out mutual dialogue. Her ethnographic notes uncover her supercilious attitude, and her denial to acknowledge the significance of the rich variety of oral folktales and proverbs in Igbo culture. The sub-heading “Parables and Proverbs” in her diary reads:

What is somewhat irksome is the habit of circumlocution that spawns these proverbs, the misdirection, obliquity, and intentional obscurity. . . .
The African mind has a tendency to go around in circles. . . . What the African ceremoniously disguises as deep thinking is to genuinely deep and complex thought what a baby’s babblings are to a great poem. . . . (109-110)

Echewa here employs the strategy of providing an anthropological account of Igbo life from the insider’s point-of-view through Nne-nne, alongside the ethnographic notes of Ashby-Jones in her diary. Nne-nne’s account, in contrary to that of Ashby-Jones’s written testimony, is oral. It is an oral narration to Ajuzia, revealing in the process the encounter with Ashby-Jones, the pains and afflictions faced by Igbo women at the time of the Aba War. It is an oral history, filled with proverbs, songs, stories, bringing out the significance of Ndom, or women’s solidarity in Igbo culture: “By recounting her story to Ajuzia . . . Nne-nne, who had always tended to be silent and fierce, is speaking on behalf of herself, her gender and her culture” (Brodzki 210). It is not a “scientific study” of Igbo culture but a deeper “understanding” of customs, of situations and circumstances under which Igbo women took Ashby-Jones as hostage during the Aba Women’s War. Faced with the insult of
being “counted” by the British government and with the decision of the imposition of tax, Igbo women revolted against native court clerks and government officials. Unlike the objectifying tendency of Ashby-Jones, Nne-nne’s narration does not objectify the white woman, her culture and ways of life. In fact, she has been designated as “Nwanyi Ibem.”

Igbo worldview highlights mutual recognition, and encourages mutual dialogue among multiple cultures, in equal grounds. But Ashby-Jones’s inability to understand Igbo customs and her attempts to flout them, lead to a misinterpretation of her motives by Igbo women, which results in taking her as hostage. The episode of her presence at the time of child-birth, ignoring the Igbo norm of restricting strangers from attending child-births, brings out her disrespect towards the beliefs of Igbo people. This tendency to interfere in the intimate moments of people’s lives, “spying on the natives,” (Minh-ha 68) and trying to “record” data, reveals the imposing nature of the anthropologist, discarding native customs. It is significant to consider Minh-ha’s argument, in this context. Taking into account the dominating nature of Western anthropologists—during the colonial period—Minh-ha writes that:

The anthropologist-nativist who seeks to perforate meaning by forcing his entry into the Other’s personal realm undertakes the desperate task of filling in all the fissures that would reveal the emptiness of knowledge. On the lookout for “messages” that might be wrested from the object of study, in spite of its opacity or its reticence in sharing its intimacy with a stranger, this knowledgeable man spends his time spying on the natives, in fear of missing any of these precious moments where the latter would be
caught unaware, therefore still living. The more indiscreet the research, the greater the value of its revelation. (68)

Echewa, in a similar vein, unveils the imposing nature of Western ethnographers, with a propensity to intrude into the private moments of people she goes to study. In the novel, during one of the question-answer sessions between Ashby-Jones and Ugbala, a girl summons Ugbala to attend to a woman suffering from labor pain; and despite Ashby-Jones’ repeated requests, Ugbala rejects her request to be present at the time of child-birth. Igbo custom denies the presence of strangers when a child is born, for the fear of evil omen—which may affect the child. However, Ashby-Jones ignores such superstitious beliefs and attends the child-birth, hiding herself near a fence. Unfortunately, the woman dies of Septicemia a day after the child-birth, and Ashby-Jones receives all the blame.

There are two aspects to which one’s attention is drawn through this episode. Firstly, the intentional disregard of the white anthropologist of the norms of Igbo culture, reflective of her gaze of superiority, whereby she dismisses the practices of Igbo culture as uncivilized. The note in her diary reads: “... I was chagrined at this most preposterous superstition. . . .” (114). There is no tendency to “understand” a culture, without taking a condescending approach towards it. One has to be aware of the fact that: “... the process of ‘cultural translation’ is inevitably enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies. . . .” (Asad 163). Therefore, what becomes important is that, “how power enters into the process of ‘cultural translation,’ seen both as a discursive and as a non-discursive practice” (Asad 163).
Secondly, considering the Igbo belief of forbidding a stranger based on a fear of evil influence, the episode directs the lens of criticism towards Igbo society itself when Ugbala and other women deny to listen to the white woman to take the help of a doctor. Their rejection of Ashby-Jones’s advice leads to the death of the woman under severe infection due to Septicemia, when she is taken to the hospital a day after. This dismissal to take a critical look at certain beliefs of one’s native culture, this denial to question them rather than comply to them which prove to be the cause of sufferings and obstructs growth of a culture, suffocates dialogue and co-existence.

Echewa highlights this aspect in another episode as well; when Ashby-Jones questions the practice of circumcision among women in Nigeria, and Ugbala denies to take a critical look into the norms of Igbo culture:

“But clitorectomy.” I [Ashby-Jones] insisted, “does not improve a girl’s hygiene the same way cutting off the prepuce involves a boy’s hygiene.”

Ugbala remained unconvinced. An uncircumcised woman would remain undesirable to most men, who would say she was “thorny” and could cause impotence or other sexual problems. (120-121)

Why does such misreading of each other happen during cross-cultural encounters? Ashby-Jones’s contemptuous attitude too, brings out the absence of any desire on her part to take a more mature approach towards “understanding” Igbo women, ripping apart her veil of false superiority. Later in the novel, when Ugbala bars her from writing the incident in her diary, she fails to comprehend the humanitarian ground on which she asks her to do that. (15)
Ashby-Jones’s repeated interrogation of Igbo women regarding their ways of life, is devoid of an intention to learn from Igbo culture, to appreciate the rich variety of oral tales and proverbs, to recognize the nature of governance among them where hierarchy is not maintained. Age is revered, and titles are conferred. But there has never been the concept of monarchical rule in Igbo culture; and therefore they fail to accept the rule of the British government, and act against the imposition of taxes. Ashby-Jones has lived with them in their village but has declined to apprehend their lives, their beliefs, their societal pattern. Her attitude has been a cause of insult for them during many situations; such as, she has several times asked Igbo women to raise hands in order to count their numbers, despite the fact being conveyed to her that they consider “counting” as an insult.16

She ends up misreading Igbo customs, either criticizing them or, at some moments, unnecessarily romanticizing them, for example, talking about Igbo democracy, devoid of any rulers, she compares it to the “classical democracies of Greece and Rome,” hastening to mention, “but without fanfare” (I Saw 101). She constructs a text based—not on her understanding, but—on her misunderstanding of Igbo people and their cultural norms.

This novel subverts the discourse of the white anthropologist invested with a position of power, by portraying a caricature of Ashby-Jones through Nne-nne. Just as Ashby-Jones caricatures Igbo women, with an attempt to “scientifically study” them, treating them as objects; Nne-nne in a manner quite different from her, provides a portrait of Ashby-Jones without an attempt to demean her culture. She reveals Ashby-Jones’s indifference towards Igbo traditions. Ajuzia recalls Nne-nne’s account:
... “She asked questions and more questions and wrote everything in her notebook. The story by everyone who met her was that she was so busy writing in her notebook that she had no chance to hear what was said to her. ...”

Nne-nne then began sketching a caricature of Mrs. Ashby-Jones in the act of writing, sitting square and erect on a backchair, a notebook open on her lap, a slowly waving Oriental fan in her left hand, her right hand moving furiously across the pages of her notebook. ... (89-90)

Nne-nne’s portraiture brings out the disinterested approach of the anthropologist to “listen” and “understand” the afflictions of Igbo women. Everyone was struck by the speed with which she wrote, and at the same time, “they bemoaned how little she listened to them when they tried to convey to her ‘the burden of life’ that was falling too heavily on them” (Brodzki 214).

Nne-nne’s oral account of the questions Igbo women ask Ashby-Jones, reflects their genuine curiosity regarding the purpose of her arrival, regarding the ways of life and cultural beliefs of a woman coming from a different culture to their own, without undermining her culture, and embracing her as a part of Ndom, for she is a woman. This is also evident from Ashby-Jones’s notes: “‘We are trying to understand why you are here,’ Ng. explained. ... Ok. added ‘Did you come all the way from your own country just to see who we are and to learn our names?’” (107). The Western anthropologist is questioned back, but her culture is not objectified:
they [Igbo women] began to ask her questions:

Did women in her country take titles? . . .

Were any titles exclusive to women? . . .

Did she personally have any titles? . . .

Again they wanted to know why she had really come to them, whether she

was a spy from the Government, sent out to probe their feelings. . . .

Was it true that White men liked to suck their wives’ lips? . . .

Was it true that White women had no milk in their breasts and that was

why they fed their cow’s milk? . . .

What was the grief of her life—the things she suffered as a woman and a

wife? Did other women look down on her because she did not have a

child? (94-95)

The manner in which they question back is very different from the Western

anthropologist’s way of interrogating them. One notices a strong Igbo worldview when they

question her, expressing even some of their prejudices, but there is no tendency to—as

Ashby-Jones does—study her “in a systematic and scientific way” (95). They do not have a

condescending attitude towards her culture, and do not objectify white ways of life. On the

contrary, Ashby-Jones’s study of Igbo women and the notes she writes in her diary stand as

an epitome of the incomprehension of a Western feminist. Despite being female, Ashby-

Jones is unable to understand the Igbo women and their culture. She is biased with

eurocentric notions about Africa.
Western anthropology and feminist studies relate issues concerning gender applicable to their society, to other societies in other parts of the world as well, claiming them as "universal," and failing to take into account the fact that issues related to gender are culture-specific, and therefore differ in the case of different cultures. I must hasten to point out that I do not speak of all feminist studies originated in the West, but it is with respect to a major body of feminist studies in nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during the colonial period, written in the West about Third World women.\(^{17}\)

Oyeronke Oyewumi has laid emphasis on the fact that:

Gender is first, and foremost, a cultural construct. As such, it is intelligible only in a cultural frame; any theory of gender, therefore, must be attentive to the fact that there are many cultures in the world and Western culture is only one of them. Thus any claims made on the basis of studies in one culture cannot necessarily hold true for other cultures and should not be universalized. Many Western theorists of gender seem to be impervious to the existence of other cultures; they make their case for gender from the narrow confines of the West. ("De-Confounding Gender" 1050)

The "establishment of Euro/American cultural hegemony throughout the world." (Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender" 1) has led to the production of feminist discourse based on the experiences of women on the West, and term it as universal, denying the diverse societies and cultures which give rise to differing experiences of women in the other parts of the world. This is because Western feminists base their patterns of thought on
"an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world" (Oyewumi, “The Invention” 540).

But, “western gender categories are presented as inherent in nature (of bodies) and operate on a dichotomous, binarily opposed male/female, man/woman duality in which the male is assumed to be superior and therefore the defining category, is particularly alien to many African cultures” (Oyewumi, “Conceptualizing Gender” 4). This construction of the concept of gender, has resulted due to the dominance of the West in fabricating knowledge, which further leads to “the racialization of knowledge” (Oyewumi “Conceptualizing Gender” 1).18

Taking into consideration the imposing influence of colonialism which has made itself felt in the production of writings—in the West—about women in the colonized parts of the world, Spivak points out how colonial forms of thought govern the nature of feminist studies in the West:

It seems particularly unfortunate when the emergent perspective of feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of imperialism. An isolationist admiration for the literature of the female subject in Europe and Anglo-America establishes the high feminist norm. It is supported and operated by an information-retrieval approach to “Third World” (the term is increasingly, and insultingly, “emergent”) literature . . . (114)

Therefore, diverse cultures with their varied societal patterns must be taken into account by feminist theorists to develop—not one Theory, but—theories of gender.
Oyewumi has upheld the idea that: “Analysis and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa. Meanings and interpretation should derive from social organization and social relations paying close attention to specific cultural and local contexts” (“Conceptualizing Gender” 4). “[G]ender,” therefore, “is actually more about gendering—a process—than about something inherent in social relations” (Oyewumi, Introduction 2). In the novel, Nne-nne questions the discourse which issues from Ashby-Jones’ notes, thereby challenging Western feminist discourse, which denies to take into consideration the diverse and differing experiences of women in divergent cultures.

By positing Nne-nne as a story-teller, Echewa brings out the difference in the perspectives of a white woman and an Igbo woman towards the cultural specificities of Igbo culture. He questions the lack of dialogue between Western discourse and African Igbo discourse, challenging the tendency to lay out certain cultural traits as universal in judging other cultures. As Kaur writes: “By problematizing the ethnographic gaze, the text [I Saw the Sky Catch Fire] initiates a reconciliatory dialogue between the skepticism and distrust of ‘Third World’ women and the condescension and incomprehension of the western feminist” (2).

A difference between the pattern of stories resulting from Nne-nne’s oral transmission and those from Ashby-Jones’s written speech about Igbo women and their culture, is very prominent in the novel. Where Ashby-Jones’ notes are “objective,” “a scientific study,” empty of emotions, Nne-nne’s account on the other hand, is filled with life, with emotions, with passion, reflecting the spirit of Ndom, and highlighting the bond between Igbo women, especially during her narration of the Aba Women’s War. Nne-nne, the grandmother, in transmitting stories to her grandson, the only heir left in the family,
weaves a history of which she has been a part, and which needs to be preserved. She brings out the true spirit of women in acting against the imposition of tax by the British government, countering the attempt to “count” them by court clerks and native officials:

“Who are you?”
“We are Ndom.”
“How many are you?”
“The White man wants to count us, but there is only one of us.
Ndom is one, uncountable upon uncountable, but still one.
Undivided.” (172)

Their resistance to being treated as objects by the white man—“counting” them to conduct a survey—and their opposition to being taxed, takes a violent turn in the Aba War.

Nne-nne’s account of the War is full of Igbo chants and songs, marking out the bodily presence of Ndom, when women use their bodies to protest, to ridicule the law and order which the colonial government attempts to maintain, by disrespecting and violating the cultural norms of Igbo people: “... all the women turned around ... turned up their buttocks and aimed them at the approaching White man. Then they pulled up their loincloths, so as to expose their naked bottoms. ... They [soldiers and the White official] felt insulted, assaulted, defiled, and cursed” (208).

Tabish Khair’s arguments with respect to the use of “body” to protest, where “acting” as a speech is resorted to, when voices go unheard, is significant to look at, in this context. He upholds the idea that: “One has to leave space for the body to ‘speak’ in action and noise—shouting, smashing—and in order to do that one has to leave space for the body
to exist outside grammatical language” (14). According to him, it is “the body that contests subalternity, that organises itself into an opposition to hegemonic discourses and structures inscribing it into subalternity” (14).

Nne-nne’s narrative of the Aba Women’s War of 1929, also uncovers the importance associated with “body,” using it as an instrument of criticism and rejection of British governance, by engaging in singing and dancing as means of protest. Judith Lynne Hanna draws one’s attention to this use of “dance-play” by women during the Aba War, and writes that: “The famous 1929 ‘women’s war’ in which the dance-play communication went unheeded illustrates the potential of this women’s political forum. Repercussions were widespread both on local and intercontinental levels. . . .” (26).

According to anthropological accounts, the War took place because of a rumour regarding the taxation of Igbo and Ibibio women, since men had already been taxed earlier resulting in a noticeable increase in the prices of palm wine.22 After “counting” the men and levying taxes on the products they sell, British government decided in September 1929 to “count” women and children too. Such “[a]ttempts to enumerate female property such as sheep, goats, and hens, as well as the women themselves, led them to believe that, since male counting in 1926 had resulted in the men being taxed, so would they be taxed” (Ifeka-Moller 131). Thereafter, an economic depression led to a sharp fall in the price of palm-wine, and the government “raised the excised duty on alcohol, tobacco, and cloth 1n 1928 . . .” (Ifeka-Moller 131). Such economic distress led to discontent among women, and resulted in the Aba Women’s War in parts of southeastern Nigeria, in the months of November and December, in 1929.23
The British used the name “Aba Riots” for the protest of 1929 staged by women in Igbo and Ibibio areas. However, Igbo people call it “Ogu Umunwanyi, the ‘Women’s War’” (Allen 59). The use of the term “Aba Riots” quite deftly “removes women from the picture. What we are left with is ‘some riots at Aba’...” (Allen 61). The term “Women’s War” brings out the importance of women protesting against unjust rulers and their imposing practices which disrupt Igbo customs. The near invisibility of men from this war, highlights the inefficiency of men to raise voice against mal-practices in law and governance by British colonial officers. Nne-nne unveils the courageous spirit of Igbo women in undertaking a war against the colonial administration.

After the arrest of Ugbala, in the novel, the women call for a massive protest, and Ashby-Jones—being considered by Igbo women as a part of the colonial government—is taken as hostage. A reversal of power dynamics is witnessed here, when she is dressed alike Igbo women, and her hair is cut short, to keep her in disguise. Ashby-Jones is subjected to repeated questioning by Okwere-ke-diya, with an aim to know the intentions of her arrival, and her interrogation of Igbo women:

...“why did you come here? ... I mean you personally, not just the government, because the same spirit must have driven you to come here as drove them. You said you came here to find out about us, woman to woman. Have you found out everything that needs to be found out about everything in the place where you have your home, and the only thing left to be found out about us was us? ...” (192)
Her questions subvert the attitude of sympathy and favour towards colonized ethnic groups nurtured by Western anthropologists. They tend to put up a demeanour of charity, in studying people from the colonized countries, as if the texts constructed by them are the only means to accord identities to non-West cultures. Echewa reveals how “Okwere-ke-diya questions the ‘selfless’ pursuit of knowledge that Ashby-Jones espouses and instead suggests that closer attention needs to be paid to the cultural practices and problems in the home country than those of far flung peoples or places, thus undermining ethnography’s Enlightenment idealism” (Kaur 8).

Ashby-Jones’s diary containing ethnographic notes is torn apart, which elicits an immediate scream as well as anger from her. Her attempts to resist the destruction of the text constructed as per her misreading of the culture of Igbo women, fade away before the authority of Ngwanze demanding the obliteration of a false testimony of Igbo community. The diary being torn, symbolizes “the destruction of a whole discursive tool, a colonial discourse aimed at normalizing inequitable power relations between the west and its colonized subjects” (Kaur 7). At this juncture, Nne-nne describes Ashby-Jones as “a strange creature,” “an apparition . . . her white skin trying to show through the indigo, circles of white around her eyes and mouth . . .” (209). She brings out the pitiable state of Ashby-Jones.

Echewa highlights the gap among Igbo and Western culture, leading to a misreading of each other’s intentions. Ashby-Jones fails to comprehend Igbo culture and beliefs, and at a moment of crisis in the novel, Igbo women mistake her to be a spy of the British colonial administration.
By underlining the manner in which Igbo women treat Ashby-Jones as a fellow woman, while at the same time they take the bold decision to captivate her, and dress her alike them. Echewa—in the novel—surfaces the predicament of native women, who, on the one hand try to embrace her as a woman, and on the other hand get enmeshed in dilemma when she declines to “understand” their “grief.” Questions hinting at the necessity for mutual dialogue, appreciation and understanding of differences, become the point of focus in the novel.

Ashby-Jones is not caused any harm even though captivated, for she is a woman, and Igbo women have a strong belief in *Oha Ndom* or Women’s Solidarity. Although she has always denied them equal status yet she is accorded the status of equality with them, the status of being a woman like them, and therefore they deter from killing her. They do not treat her as an object who can be constructed as per their whims; quite unlike Ashby-Jones, who fabricates Igbo culture and women through her notes in the diary, being unable to understand their customs. Nne-nne describes the agony of the situation when they have been in an indecisive state as to let her be free or kill her: “This woman had been with us for nearly a week. She was thin and emaciated and sad. None of us had the heart to do her any harm. . . .” (214). And then one finds the words of Ugbala: “Anyway, she is a woman. And that tangles her around our necks, arms, and waist. We have no choice except to let her go. But we must drink the wine of union with her. We must swear with her” (216).

This act of drinking and swearing with her, accentuates the manner in which they embrace her as a woman alike them. The oaths they take before drinking the “wine of union” bring out the significance of Igbo cultural worldview which highlights women’s solidarity, not only within the culture but also outside. The oaths unite them together,
irrespective of their cultural differences, at the same time calling attention to the need to read the native culture with an aim to understand the cultural diversity it calls for, and not undermine it:

"Let her feel our grief!"
"Let her feel Woman’s Grief!"
"Let the burden of our grief sit before her eyes!"...
"And make her fingers limp, so that she cannot pick up a writing stick and write with it!"
"If she writes, let her write the truth about us!"
"If she speaks, let her speak the truth about us!"... (217)

Thereafter, she is escorted to a place near Onu Miri, where soldiers discover her the next day. The white woman remains—till the end—unable to relate herself to native women, while the importance attached by Igbo to the notion of Ndom, lead them to embrace her as one of their own, very well highlighted by their drinking of the “wine of union” with her.

The notion of “cosmopolitanism”—used by W. E. B. Du Bois is relevant in this context. Kwame Anthony Appiah—in talking about Du Bois’s concept of “cosmopolitanism”—highlights the two tresses of meaning entwining the idea of “cosmopolitanism”: first, that “we have obligations to others” beyond racial or national ties, and secondly, “we take seriously not just the value of human life but of particular human lives,” (31) acknowledging their differences and learning from them. It is this idea to “learn something from those they differ from, even from those they disagree with,” (39) which
Echewa emphasizes, and which needs to be imbibed within every culture, to engage in relations of mutual respect, to open up a space for each other.

Echewa, in sketching the character of Elizabeth Ashby-Jones, challenges the condescending attitude of Western ethnographers towards non-Western cultures, predominantly witnessed during the colonial era. The detailed account of Igbo ways of life from the viewpoint of the white anthropologist in her diary, brings out Echewa’s “quality of sheer imaginative penetration, the capacity to fathom the inner subjective lives of persons of another age, sex or race...” (Wright 263). He “achieves an authenticity quite unprecedented in portrayals of the mind of the white woman by African male novelists” (263).

He raises certain pertinent questions: “Why can’t people from different cultures treat each other with respect? Why is it always a necessity to consider some cultures as superior and others inferior?” (Interview). By creating Nne-ne’s version of history, and providing an anthropological account of Igbo ways of life by an Igbo woman, alongside the account of Ashby-Jones, he juxtaposes Western and Igbo worldviews, and emphasizes the need to value cultural diversities, and the need to accord respect to each other.

The next chapter deals with certain other episodes in *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, where the emphasis shifts from cross-cultural to cross-gender encounters within Igbo society, while questioning some practices which frustrate a space for co-existence to develop among men and women, in an equalized terrain.
Notes

1 See Echewa, I Saw the Sky Catch Fire 217.

2 See Minh-ha.

3 It is important here to take account of Talal Asad's argument, that:

They [ethnographers/anthropologists] even construct folk memories. . . . In the long run, therefore, it is not the personal authority of the ethnographer, but the social authority of his ethnography that matters. And that authority is inscribed in the institutionalized forces of industrial capitalist society . . . which are constantly tending to push the meaning of various Third World societies in a single direction. This is not to say that there are no resistances to this tendency. But "resistance" in itself indicates the presence of a dominant force. (163)

4 What I say about Western anthropologists here is not a generalization of the works of all anthropologists in the West. I take into consideration majority of anthropological writings during and immediately after colonization in Nigeria, related to the manner in which cultures of different ethnic groups in Africa, especially in Nigeria, are portrayed in ethnographic accounts.

5 Ngugi talks about the book Race and the Enlightenment edited by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, in this context, and highlights the naked truth underlying the philosophies put forth by Emmanuel Kant, David Hume, and Hegel. Kant, "a teacher of new geography and anthropology," who "never left Königsberg, his place of birth, he could only have based his knowledge on explorer narratives, ethnographies, and their description of fauna and flora." (Globalectics 32). Hume always considered "Africans as being naturally inferior to whites;" and Hegel in his "philosophical rhapsodies on the triumphant march of reason in history, somehow bypassing Africa, as well as his negative comments on African religions, were based on the same missionary and explorer narratives," (33) writes Ngugi.
Therefore, what he intends to bring to the fore is the fact that: "Many of these philosophers used each other as sources and proofs of their own observations; prejudice thus reinforcing prejudice till it became an accepted truth, an authoritative norm" (33).

6 Ngugi's concept of "globalectical reading" has been discussed in details in Chapter 1.

7 Unpublished manuscript by courtesy of the author.

8 It is important to check out Minh-ha's argument in this respect:

... [The anthropologist] assumes the role of purveyor of "certain truths," pursuing a "perspectivistic knowledge" while keeping an eye profoundly glued on "scientific objectivity" as methodological goal. Some indignantly deny the presence of object in objectivity and say of those who read in this term a tendency to turn people into odd insects for investigation that they are suffering from "a lack of epistemological knowledge." (55)

9 See Brodzki, 209-211.

10 Pratt suggests the need to liberate oneself from such constricting perspective, and writes that:

... anthropologists stand to gain from looking at themselves as writing inside as well as outside the discursive traditions that precede them; inside as well as outside the histories of contact on which they follow. Such a perspective is particularly valuable for people who would like to change or enrich the discursive repertoire of ethnographic writing—especially that "impossible attempt to fuse objective and subjective practices." Surely a first step toward such change is to recognize that one's tropes are neither natural nor, in many cases, native to the discipline. Then it becomes possible, if one wishes, to liberate oneself from them, not by doing away with tropes (which is not possible) but by appropriating and inventing new ones (which is). (49-50)
11 This aspect is dealt with details in the next chapter.

12 Igbo people consider counting them as an insult to them, since they are not animals to be numbered.

13 The Igbo worldview encouraging mutual recognition, is manifested in the title of the thesis itself: “Let the kite perch! Let the eagle also have a perch...” (The Land’s Lord 45-46).

14 Ashby-Jones’s diary reads: “...Everyone in the place suddenly turned hostile towards me. I wished to explain, but no one was interested in whatever I had to say... I tried to persuade these people to take this girl who was prone to die of some infection if she was not promptly cared for to the hospital...” (114-115)

15 Her notes in the diary speaks of her inability to understand Ugbala’s point-of-view:

...Ugbala asked me [Ashby-Jones]. “Did you write about this unfortunate young woman in your book?”

“Yes.” I admitted hesitantly.

“You must tear it up,” Ugbala said.

“Why?”

“You were not supposed to be there, and that young woman’s travail was not meant as a spectacle for strangers. Especially now that she died in it, you cannot write it in a book for all to read.”...“Perhaps. When I get home,” I said. “At least I will consider it.”...

I did not answer further and was relieved that we went on to something else. (116)

16 On the very first day of Ashby-Jones’s encounter with village women, she is informed of the insult Igbo women experience on any attempt to count them:

“How many here are title-holders?” Mrs. Ashby-Jones asked.

No hands were raised...

...At length they were able to tell her that the women felt insulted...
that she should ask them to raise their hands as if they were little children. Her insult was further compounded by the fact that the people she was asking to raise their hands were titleholders. A major reason for taking a title was to earn respect and deference.

From her notes, it seems that Mrs. Ashby-Jones breached this point of etiquette many times by asking her hosts for a show of hands or to number one thing or another. . . . (94)

In this context, it is important to take Kaur's contentsions into account: “While it is true that in recent years feminist studies in the west have become more sensitive in engaging in a meaningful dialogue with ‘third world’ women, their overriding perspective and attitude still tends to be largely patronizing and condescending” (2). Also, Michèle Barrett points out that: “The dominant voices of contemporary white anglophone feminism are Mary Daly, Adrienne Rich, Andrea Dworkin and Dale Spender. As both Hester Eisenstein and Lynne Segal have argued, a common thread running through their writings is essentialism: ‘a feminist version of the eternal female’ . . . This essentialism goes hand in hand with intellectual separatism. . . .” (44). Spivak directs one’s attention to the more degenerated portrayal an Eastern woman is subjected to, when the writer is a “woman” from the West: “When publishing women are from the dominant ‘culture,’ they sometimes share, with male authors, the tendency to create an inchoate “other” (often female) . . .” (A Critique 113).

Oyewumi highlights the fact that:

In African studies, historically and currently, the creation, constitution, and production of knowledge have remained the privilege of the West. Therefore, body-reasoning and the bio-logic that derives from the biological determinism inherent in Western thought have been imposed on African societies. . . . in Western societies, physical bodies are always social bodies [which is not the case for Nigerian cultures, like Igbo culture, or Yoruba culture]. . . . The question, then, is: On what basis are Western conceptual categories exportable or transferable to other cultures that have a different cultural logic?
... differing cultures may construct social categories differently... ("The Invention"
541-544).

19 The role of grandmothers as story-tellers in many cultures in Africa, have very
significant contributions to the framing of histories of each culture. In this context, I would like to direct
one’s attention to the concept of the grandmother as the story-teller, according to Minh-ha:

Mother always has a mother. And Great Mothers are recalled as the goddesses of all
waters, the sources of diseases and of healing, the protectresses of women and of
childbearing. To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for
understanding means creating. . . . In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening
refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard,
smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman
partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. . . . (121)

20 A woman creating histories, acts as a counter to men’s histories. This aspect is dealt
with in details in the next chapter.

21 See Chapter 1.

22 Caroline Ifeka-Moller writes:

In late 1929, women of the Igbo- and Ibibio-speaking ethnic groups in eastern Nigeria,
angered at the rumour that they were about to made to pay tax, attacked the native
Courts and District offices of the colonial administration, freed prisoners, and looted
European trading factories. . . . In that year adult males were counted, but not told that it
was for purposes of taxation. A tax of 7s a head was levied in 1928, to a background of
smouldering discontent. . . . The administration started to reassess some communities in
Owerri and Calabar provinces in September 1929; officials insisted on counting not just
the men, but also their women and children. . . . Women therefore started to get together
to discuss their fears. These meetings were held from mid-October of 1929. . . . (128-131)

23 Judith Van-Allen gives an account of the Aba War:

The events that occurred in Calabar and Owerri provinces in southeastern Nigeria in November and December of 1929, and that have come to be known in Western social-science literature as the “Aba Riots,” are a natural focus for an investigation of the impact of colonialism on Igbo women. . . . In November of 1929, thousands of Igbo women from these provinces converged on the Native Administration centres. . . . The women chanted, danced, sang songs of ridicule, and demanded the caps of office . . . of the Warrant Chiefs . . . The British “won,” and they have imposed their terminology on history; only a very few scholars have recorded that the Igbo called this the “Women’s War.” (59-60)

24 This aspect is dealt with in the next chapter.

25 Appiah writes that: “There is a word for the character of the nationalism that Du Bois expressed: it is cosmopolitan. Even here, in defining a Negro creed, he speaks not just of racial but of human brotherhood” (30).

26 As said in the Interview. See Appendix.

Works Cited


