CHAPTER FIVE

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ACHEBE AND NGUGI’S SELECTED NOVELS

5.1 Comparative Study of the Selected Novels of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o

Achebe highlights the roles of women in pre-colonial Africa, especially in Nigeria, through his female characters. The female characters in his novels are very obedient to males, and their lives are greatly affected by the desires and expectations of their fathers and husbands. Fathers sell their daughters off to marriage, and husbands beat their wives. Similarly, Ngugi shows that women in Kikuyu society are exploited in many ways. They are forced to give up their duties and work for Europeans; this leads them to physical and sexual abuse by European as well as African men.

In Achebe’s novels, women are beaten for minor mistakes. Okonkwo beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo because she is not at home to do her household work. Beating woman is a common and normal thing; Okonkwo beats even his favourite wife Ekwefi, just to show his manliness. He beats Ekwefi more in comparison to the other two wives because he loves her more than the other wives and does not want to be weak because of his love for her. She does not retaliate. On the contrary, next day she works very sincerely with the other two wives. She accepts the beating because in a traditional patriarchal
social system, women’s voice was totally suppressed. No authority was there to take due notice of their reactions. It was a kind of dictatorship in which the victim’s reaction was not taken into consideration.

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe depicts Igbo society during the late 1800s and women’s plight at that time. During the nineteenth century, women were oppressed, and confined to the role of nurturing. In *Things Fall Apart*, the focus is on the family of Okonkwo who has three wives, Nwoye’s mother, Ekwefi and Ojiugo but in *Weep Not, Child*, the focus is on Ngotho’s family who has two wives, Njeri and Nyokabi. Ngotho and Nyokabi send their son to school in order to bring happiness and wealth to the family. Similarly, Okonkwo depends on Nwoye to hold his women folk and rule the household after his death. It was a traditional but wrong, illogical superstition that only son in the family can be the inheritor of the family in future and daughter was never considered to be so. In Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child* Njoroge who is sent to school by his parents in order to be educated and be capable to lead his family but Njoroge is not able to fulfil their parent’s expectation to be so. Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart* shows that Nwoye who is expected to hold the womenfolk like his father, goes away from the family permanently by converting himself into Christianity.

There is a similarity between Nyokabi, Ngotho’s second wife and Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife. Both the women as responsible
mothers are caring, loving and ambitious for their children. Nyokabi, despite her illiteracy, strongly desires to educate her son; also Ekwefi is equally ambitious, caring and anxious about Ezinma’s (her daughter’s) future. When Njoroge wants to commit suicide, Nyokabi follows him and does not let him commit suicide. Similarly, when Chielo comes to take Ezinma, Ekwefi follows them in order to know about the fate of her daughter. It proves how mothers are more caring and conscious about their children’s future and happiness.

In *Things Fall Apart* women cannot complain in front of their husbands but in *Weep Not, Child* women do so. Ngotho’s wives, Njeri and Nyokabi participate in the current issues of their society. They are not insulted and beaten by their husband but Okonkwo’s wives despite their hard work and sincerity are beaten and insulted continuously by him. Due to this ill-treatment and Okonkwo’s cruelty and extremely pressuring attitude to his wives, unlike Ngotho’s wives, they are not aware as such about their own lives and the lives of their children.

Njeri as a sincere wife and woman is worried about Nyokabi’s son. Regarding Njoroge’s intention in committing suicide, she independently and anxiously helps Nyokabi to prohibit her son from committing suicide. In *Things Fall Apart* women suffer due to the patriarchal customs of Igbo society but in *Weep Not, Child* women suffer due to colonialism.
In *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*, Achebe and Ngugi find out the cultural ethos and roots of their respective societies and indicate that due to colonialism their respective societies are torn apart. *Things Fall Apart* deals with the customs and rites of Igbos in Eastern Nigeria of 1890s, but *The River Between* describes the late 1920s life of Kikuyu people in Kenya. Both the novels seek to show the real pictures of Igbo and Kikuyu societies respectively. Both the protagonists, Okonkwo and Waiyaki try to safeguard their respective societies from the adverse effects of colonialism and lead tragic life. *Things Fall Apart* describes how British colonizers violently take control of Southern Nigeria, whereas *The River Between* deals with the period when Kenya was under British colonialism.

Through *The River Between*, Ngugi strongly opposes the African tribal rite of female circumcision and colonialism. Due to coldness of colonialism as well as Kenyan some wrong traditions, women are cruelly tortured. Joshua is not happy with Miriamu because she is a circumcised woman and despises her. Joshua is a stubborn and hard-hearted man but his wife is a kind and peace-loving woman. Similarly, Okonkwo estranges with his son Nwoye because Nwoye converts himself to Christianity and looks effeminate to Okonkwo.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s wives and children suffer due to Okonkwo’s strictness in following his social traditions whereas in *The River Between*, Joshua’s wife and daughters suffer due to harshness and strictness in following Christianity. Joshua does not
allow them to follow the rituals of the Kenyan society. Okonkwo tries his level best to change the soft and gentle qualities of his son, Nwoye to harsh and rough ones by telling him ‘masculine stories of violence and bloodshed’. While in The River Between, Chege tells his son Waiyaki the real stories of Kikuyu society.

He views kindness, gentleness and softness as nothing but feminine traits. Okonkwo traps and imprisons himself by following such kind of classification that everything strong is associated with men and everything weak is attributed to women. This leads to his down-fall. In The River Between Joshua’s views are also expressed from a patriarchal point of view. He is merciless to his daughters Muthoni and Nyambura. Joshua curses his daughters for their deeds which are not in conformity with Christian faith.

In Things Fall Apart Okonkwo’s daughters are in conformity with him. Ezinma obeys Okonkwo and understands him very well. Ezinma and her younger half-sister, Obiageli refuse all the suitors during exile for the sake of their father. But in The River Between Joshua’s daughters, Muthoni and Nyambura rebel against him and leave him. It proves that Ngugi’s women characters are assertive and present feminist consciousness. On the contrary, Achebe’s women characters in Things Fall Apart are voiceless and silent. Ezinma tells Obiageli not to marry in exile. Ezinma can convince her and stays unmarried during exile. Nyambura cannot convince her sister, Muthoni not to get circumcised. Muthoni is the symbol of reconciliation because she
is a Christian girl and at the same time, she wants to get circumcised in order to improve her femininity. She clearly tells Nyambura, her sister:

*Look, please, I — I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges.*

This example expresses her consciousness and firmness. However, in both the cases women are victims. They suffer whether due to Igbo and Kikuyu customs or colonialism. In *Things Fall Apart* women suffer due to Igbo customs and traditions but in *The River between* women suffer due to both, Kikuyu customs and colonialism.

Okonkwo’s first wife (Nowye’s mother) and Joshua’s wife Miriamu are good mothers and peace-loving women but they are not assertive and reactionary women. Okonkwo disowns Nwoye for his conversion into Christianity, Joshua also disowns his both the daughters for their rebellion but Nowye’s mother and Miriamu as two caring mothers cannot react to their husbands’ decisions of disowning their own children. Achebe and Ngugi have portrayed them realistically.

Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and Ngugi in *The River Between* show the significance of mother—Nwoye’s mother and Miriamu. These two mothers represent Nigerian and Kenyan mothers respectively. Through Nwoye’s mother and Miriamu the readers understand the critical situation of mothers in Nigerian and Kenyan
societies. Achebe and Ngugi show the significance of mother in preparing new generation. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays mother as supreme. Okonkwo resorts to his mother’s clan when unknowingly he kills someone. Ngugi shows that in a patriarchal society mother performs an important role in preparing new generation and has to shoulder all the responsibilities of the children.

Achebe and Ngugi reveal that the good deeds of the children are attributed to the father and bad deeds are attributed to the mother. In Ngugi’s *The River Between* Joshua (father) gets angry with Miriamu for Muthoni’s (daughter) absence at home. Similarly, in Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu (father) gets angry with his wife for their son’s misbehaviour (committing sacrilege). These are the illustrations of husbands’ domination in the family.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo’s wife, Ekwefi is an assertive female character. She is courageous. Okonkwo forbids her to follow Ezinma and Chielo but she ignores Okonkwo and follows them to know about the destiny of her daughter, Ezinma. In addition, she makes Okonkwo follow Chielo. In *The River Between*, Joshua’s wife, Miriamu is a submissive woman. She is not brave like Ekwefi to cross her husband, Joshua. When her daughter, Nyambura goes away with Waiyaki, she simply sheds tears.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Mgbafo and in *A Grain of Wheat* Wangari leave their husbands, Uzowulu and Waruhiu respectively, because
they are constantly ill-treated and beaten by their husbands. Achebe and Ngugi through their portrayal reveal that women are doubly oppressed by their own men as well as by the colonial government. Achebe and Ngugi genuinely want improvement in their women’s plights.

Let us have some more examples of male domination in Igbo and Kikuyu societies. In Achebe’s Arrow of God, Ezeulu considers himself superior to his wife, Ugoye due to his manliness. His son, Oduche does sacrilege by imprisoning the sacred python, Ugoye wants to save her son from his downfall, but Ezeulu’s (her husband) extreme domination does not permit her to do so. Ezeulu totally fails in his life. According to Achebe, it is a natural punishment to him for Ezeulu’s ill-treatment to his wife. In Ngugi’s The River Between, Muthoni’s mother does not have any freedom to do anything positively for her daughters, because Joshua, a dominant and cruel husband decides everything negatively against his daughters without consulting his wife.

Achebe and Ngugi present two types of women—submissive and assertive. Women in Achebe’s first novel, Things Fall Apart are rarely assigned any role worth mentioning and their image as individuals remains dwarfed in a polygamous and patriarchal set up. Achebe strongly believes in his women’s genuine capabilities. In Things Fall Apart, he appears to be more realistic, but in his later novels, he reveals his women’s potentialities through their active
participation in political events and their bold decisions in their individual, family and social lives. For example: *A Man of the People* marks a radical departure from this dwarfed image of women. In this novel, Eunice is a strong feminist and a qualified lawyer who participates actively in the political events. She alone displays enough courage to avenge the death of her lover, Max, by killing the culprit, Chief Koko. In *No Longer at Ease*, Clara is presented as *osu* but she is assertive and independent. She does not want to depend even on her lover, Obi. She decides not to marry him. It is her own decision. Obi’s mother is also another woman character who makes her own decision with full confidence. She tells her son, Obi not to marry Clara. Similarly, in *Weep Not, Child*, Nyokabi is a strong and confident woman. She decides to send her son, Njoroge to school him to learn Whiteman’s techniques and wisdom.

Ngugi’s *No Longer at Ease* illustrates social discrimination. Clara and Obi are educated and genuinely love each other. They break up their relationship, because of social discrimination. Social situation does not allow her to marry to Obi, because she is an *osu* and Obi belongs to an upper class. She suffers a lot due to social discrimination. *The River Between* also illustrates social discrimination which causes women’s acute sufferings. Waiyaki and Nyambura from this novel intimately love each other, but they could not get married. Waiyaki’s mother strongly opposes their marriage, because Nyambura is an uncircumcised girl. Social situation causes her suffering.
Through the portrayals of Barrister Mrs Akilo, Edna and Elsie in *A Man of the People*, Achebe shows women’s plight in Nigeria. Similarly, Ngugi shows the plight of women in Kenya through the portrayals of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, Mumbi in *A Grain of Wheat*. In their respective novels, Achebe and Ngugi show that women are sexually and mentally exploited.

Achebe and Ngugi explicitly show that in a male dominating society, women are brutally oppressed and sexually exploited. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe shows that Elsie is brutally raped by the minister of the state, Chief Nanga. In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi shows that Wanja is cruelly raped by a ruthless businessman, Kimeria. She is economically and sexually exploited. These illustrations reveal that even in neocolonial and capitalistic situations women are economically and sexually exploited.

In *A Man of the People*, Elsie represents women of Nigeria. Her sexual exploitation by Nanga indicates women’s plight in Nigeria. Similarly, in *Petals of Blood*, Wanja represents the condition of Kenyan women.

Achebe is aware of the submissive as well as rebellious traits of his characters. Nwoye is in conformity with Okonkwo at the beginning, but his father’s cruel act of killing innocent Ikemefuna makes him rebel against his father. Ngugi is equally aware of his characters’ submissive as well as rebellious traits. In *The River*
Between Nyambura is contented with her father, but after Muthoni’s death, she rebels against her father and leaves him.

In Ngugi’s The River Between and Petals of Blood, Muthoni’s aunt (Njeri) and Nyakinyua are portrayed as orthodox. In Achebe’s No Longer at Ease Obi’s mother is also portrayed as orthodox. But Nyokabi in Ngugi’s Weep Not, Child is portrayed as unorthodox, because she sends her son, Njoroge to mission school believing that her son will bring success and happiness in their family. She is also portrayed as a caring mother who prohibits Njoroge from committing suicide.

In Ngugi’s novels, there are male and female protagonists. The female protagonists are Njeri and Nyokabi in Weep Not, Child, Muthoni and Nyambura in The River Between, Mumbi in A Grain of Wheat, and Wanja in Petals of Blood. His male protagonist, Waiyaki in The River Between is affected by the female protagonists, Muthoni and Nyambura. After Muthoni’s death, her sister, Nyambura turns from a submissive being to a rebellious one and defies her father. In Ngugi’s novels, women have more significant roles in society; still, they are exploited and dominated by their male counterparts. It is rightly observed:

*The life of Gikonyo and Mumbi is one of the most significant points of attention in A Grain of Wheat because it enlarges the traditional conflict between man and woman in society and prescribes*
solution, which is still relevant to the entire situation in the novel. The most important prescription is recognition of equality and mutual cooperation.\(^8\)

In Achebe’s novels, most of his protagonists are men. In general his women characters are voiceless. For example, Ekwefi, Ojiugo, Elsie, Clara and Edna etc undergo mental even physical torture as well as psychological exploitation. They always strive to protect themselves from mental and physical torture. Achebe positively believes in their potentialities. He appreciates their patience, tolerance, maturity, wisdom, love and resourcefulness. He positively presents their significant roles in economic, social, cultural aspects of Igbo society. Their contributions in child nurturing are explicitly presented. He presents them realistically and with a feminist perspective.

**5.2 Similarities and Differences between Feminist Perspectives of Achebe and Ngugi**

As a foremost African novelist, Chinua Achebe has been of great interest to several research scholars and critics. There is a considerable criticism available on his first four novels, *Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, No longer at Ease, and A Man of the People*. Many critics have categorized Achebe’s first four novels as his tetralogy. His novels prove to be attempts to confront and change the perception of the western world towards Africa as a Dark Continent.
These novels document Nigerian history between 1890 and 1965. They cover the early phase of colonial encounter as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Achebe performs the role of a social critic in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People* which are post-colonial novels.

As one of the most significant writers of East Africa, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o also is known as a spokesperson, the voice of the Kenyan people and a chronicler of Kenya’s modern history. Ngugi’s concern is for the poor people of Kenya who have been inhumanly displaced by the white colonialists and by some African opportunists who seized power after independence. Unlike Achebe, Ngugi’s novels do not deal with polygamy and bride-price and he does not go deep into the customs of his tribe. His novels describe the colonial period between 1920 to 1980. Harish Narang (1995) observes:

*Ngugi, unlike Achebe, does not go into great many details of the tribal life and its custom which many earlier African novelists considered essential for the understanding of the western audience and which made their novels look more like ethnographic texts than works of fiction. Instead, Ngugi plunges straight away into contemporary Kenyan history, filling in the most essential details of the Gikuyu past through myths and stories.*

Achebe and Ngugi firmly believe that the African past has been deliberately distorted by the European writers. The African writers especially Achebe and Ngugi have made an attempt through their
respective literary works to oppose such writers. Achebe and Ngugi along with the other African writers have emphasized on the customs and traditions of their tribal communities.

The novels of these two well-known African writers are realistic. Their novels necessarily talk about the Nigerian and Kenyan societies of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras. Achebe and Ngugi concentrate on their communities, Igbo and Kikuyu respectively with special reference to women’s genuine issues existing during the period mentioned earlier.

Igbo people are mostly craftsmen, traders and farmers. Their most important crop is the yam and other staple crops are like cassava and taro. Annually, the Igbo people hold functions to celebrate the harvesting of yam. The Kikuyu, as the largest ethnic group in Kenya had a significant role in the development of an independent nation. Their indigenous economy was based on the cultivation of millet, peas, beans, sorghum, and sweet potatoes.

In Igbo and Kikuyu proverbs, women are portrayed as being childish, irresponsible, foolish, weak, unreliable, wicked, dangerous and generally inferior to men. The Igbo proverbs regarding women are as follows:

‘Due to their habitual denial of favours they receive, women do not grow beards.’
'A woman whose husband has just died and she prepares to go to market knows what killed him.'

'A dog trained by a woman (always) bites people to death.'

The Kikuyu proverbs regarding women are given below:

'The more women you have in your house, the more troubles you must expect.'

'Two wives are two pots full of poison.'

'Women have no upright words, but only crooked ones.'

Achebe and Ngugi through their novels admit that their societies have some torturing customs and state that Africa is not perfect. They present both the aspects of their societies, negative as well as positive ones. For example, in Nigeria, taking a person as a ransom and then killing him (Ikemefuna), and existence of caste like osu were among negative customs. In Kenya performing circumcision as an important custom was one of the torturing traditions of Kenyan society. The main purpose in writing novel is that they want to make their people understand their weaknesses and bring changes in their lives. Changes in any society, especially Africa—Nigeria and Kenya cannot be brought about overnight because the customs of each society are rooted deeply. So, changes should come through a better understanding.
Achebe and Ngugi positively present that before colonialism, in Igbo and Kikuyu societies; women partially enjoyed power and had political, social and economic independence. In Nigeria, according to Yoruba and Hausa legends women were in power like Moremi of Ile-Ife. Similarly, in Kenya, women were in power. For example, Wangu Wa Makeri was in power. She was a “headman”, but men did not accept her as a “headman”, so, she lost her power.

Both the writers show how colonization cruelly deprived the African woman of her traditional status. Ngugi’s The River Between is an example of the racial exploitation in the form of cultural exploitation. Achebe believes that colonialism purposefully cultivated inferiority complex among the Africans. He asserts that the function of African literature is to help African society to repossess the lost belief in itself and do away with the obstacles and complexes of the years of denigration.

Colonialism undermined the African culture and religion. So, Achebe asserts the need to revisit the past. And use of English in order to show the effects of colonialism and exploitation of the society. Ngugi opines that removing English and replacing it by the African native languages is an important point to decolonize the minds of his people.

Achebe and Ngugi agree that colonialism and post-colonialism are responsible for the oppression of African women. They have
explicitly shown through their literary works that Nigeria and Kenya even before the arrival of colonialism were patriarchal societies but colonialism has worsened women’s situation because colonialism introduced its own education and Christian evangelism which both were patriarchal and were used as an important means to colonize Africa—Nigeria and Kenya.

Achebe and Ngugi have perfect understanding of women’s plights. Therefore, they assign crucial roles to their female characters with understanding and sympathy. Subjugation of women and their maltreatment are evident in their works. Through their literary works, they seem to encourage women to be aware of their conditions and start rising up and revolutionize the societal conditions to get their genuine rights and be equal to their male counterparts. They portray women’s struggle to get rid of both male domination and colonialism.

Ngugi firmly believes in women’s natural abilities to transform their society. During the Mau Mau revolution, Ngugi reveals women’s exploitation physically, mentally, sexually and economically. Ngugi widely shows the impact of patriarchy on women in pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial Kenyan society.

Achebe and Ngugi have written about the conditions of their own people. Their views and interpretation of the problems of African people are different from one another. Achebe prefers a gradual reformist agenda and focuses on the internal factors of Nigeria. He
expects his people to unite in order to confront colonization and eliminate the effects of colonization. Achebe opines that corruption inside Africa is the major obstacle to change the image of Africa. His novel, *A Man of the People* clearly reiterates this fact. According to Ngugi, all the problems of Africa are inevitable consequences of colonialism and the effect of European capitalist imperialism. He calls for a revolution against colonialism and capitalism and uses socialism as the ideological guide. Achebe and Ngugi’s perspectives and styles of writing are different from each other but at the same time, they have similarities. Simon Gikandi (2000) rightly mentions:

*Like Achebe and the first generation of modern African writers, Ngugi was interested in a fairly coherent set of questions and ideas—the process of colonization and its effect on African selves and cultures; the efficacy and limit of old traditions in the constitution of new African identities; the imperative for decolonization; and the failure of national consciousness.*

Ngugi is a feminist writer in a humanistic sense which means he is not a radical feminist. Achebe has been criticized as a sexist writer; however, he strongly defends himself to be not so. He states that falling of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is due to Okonkwo’s negligence and ill-treatment of women.

Ngugi portrays his people’s struggle in his literary works and prominently deals with the nature of the exploitation of the masses
and their protest. His novels, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* are good examples to support this fact. Ngugi seeks to bring about changes in society through violence. Boro, in *Weep Not, Child*, Kihika, in *A Grain of Wheat*, and Karega, in *Petals of Blood* protest and rebel against injustice and exploitation in their respective societies.

Ngugi’s attempts are to eliminate the capitalist socio-economic structure in Kenya. He believes that colonialism came to Africa through imposition of imperial expansion of capitalist western powers and was developed through religion and education. Ngugi portrays education as an agent of capitalism because education which was spread through missionaries was an instrument to colonize Africa.

R. Mugo Gatheru. (2005) says, ‘the missionaries’ negative attitudes and attempts to de-Africanize African cultures became a part of their evangelization and education.’ Thus, Education and religion hand in hand with capitalism worked to create social classes in the Third World countries and deculturize their indigenous culture. Both Achebe and Ngugi criticize education in Africa during colonization.

5.3 Conclusion

In the beginning of the chapter, the selected novels of Achebe and Ngugi are juxtaposed with the help of similarities and differences between the female characters. The main focus is on the roles of the women characters, their struggle to establish their own identity and
educate their families. Comparison has been carefully done between Achebe’s women characters and Ngugi’s women characters. The positive and negative aspects of their women characters have been appropriately highlighted by them through their novels. Then, an effort is made to juxtapose the two novelists: Achebe and Ngugi. There are some striking qualities of their writings. In this chapter, the researcher has logically and carefully analysed Igbo and Kikuyu societies which are patriarchal in structure and greatly affect women’s lives. To conclude that Achebe and Ngugi have striking qualities as novelists. They are committed authors and believe in the philosophy, “art for the sake of life”.

REFERENCES


