



# From Womanism To Stiwanism: Gender Roles And Feminist Ideologies In Chinua Achebe's *A Man Of The People*

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## ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* offers a critical analysis of gender roles and feminist ideologies in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel, through characters like Mrs. Elizabeth Nanga, Eunice, and Edna, captures aspects of Womanism, which prioritizes the everyday experiences of Black women, with a focus on African women. Womanism, as evolved by Alice Walker and reworked to African literary theory, examines the intersectionality of race, gender, and class and the specific challenges of African women. With the progression of the narrative, the term Stiwanism comes into view, moving from personal gender battles to the common involvement of women in social change. Stiwanism, as defined by Nigerian academic Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, places great importance on the need for women to play a role in constructing political, economic, and cultural frameworks within Africa. The research paper traces the shift from Womanism to Stiwanism, with a focus on how female protagonists subvert the conventional gender constructs and add to the changing conversation on gender equity in African literature.

## Introduction

Feminist theories in African literature have grown immensely over the decades, and Womanism and Stiwanism have developed as two such major theoretical systems that discuss gender roles in the particular socio-cultural and historical spheres of Africa. In contrast to Western feminism's emphasis on gender-based oppression, African feminist theory is more intersectional in focus, acknowledging the cumulative impact of race, culture, colonialism, and economic inequality on women's lives.

Womanism, as defined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1982), recognizes the specific experiences of Black women, especially those of African heritage. Womanism moves beyond gender oppression to include concerns of race, class, and cultural identity and promotes a more comprehensive approach to social justice. Womanism is firmly grounded in the African communal tradition, where family and societal ties are valued in addition to individual autonomy. In African literary theory, Womanism has also been extended by critics like Chikwenye Ogunyemi, who contends that Womanism is concerned not just with gender but with racial unity and survival of whole communities. While Womanism establishes the premise of the lived lives of African women, Stiwanism (introduced by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations*, 1994) further advances the discourse by promoting women's agency in matters of society transformation. As opposed to Womanism, which is more concerned with the personal and collective experience of women, Stiwanism is overtly concerned with the structural issues in African societies and advocates for women's inclusion in political, economic, and cultural transformation. The name "Stiwanism" means "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa" and reflects a positive feminist movement whose objective is to redefine the woman's role in government and national development. Rather than positioning feminism as a struggle against men, Stiwanism promotes a cooperative model where men and women work together to foster social progress.

Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* serves as a foundational text for analyzing these perspectives through its female characters, who navigate the constraints of patriarchy while asserting their agency. The novel, which is located in post-independence Nigeria, is critical of corruption and political decline but also offers a balanced portrayal of women's roles in a changing society. Through characters like Mrs.

Elizabeth Nanga, Eunice, and Edna, Achebe offers different levels of conformity and resistance to gender roles. Their paths in the novel depict the gradual shift away from Womanist ideals of personal empowerment and survivance towards Stiwanist ideals of institutional change and action.

Through dual readings of *A Man of the People* using both Womanism and Stiwanism, this research seeks to illuminate the evolving character of African feminist thought in literature. It discusses how Achebe's portrayal of gender dynamics captures wider social transformation and advances the gender equality debate in postcolonial African societies. In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of incorporating African feminist theories in literary criticism to improve understanding of the complex relationship between tradition, modernity, and gender in African literature.

### Literature Review

An in-depth examination of the literature on Womanism and Stiwanism in African writing demonstrates the development of feminist thought in postcolonial environments. These theoretical traditions have been enhanced by scholars such as Alice Walker, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie, and Obioma Nnaemeka.

Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1982) laid the groundwork for Womanist thought by highlighting Black women's creative and intellectual contributions to society. Ogunyemi's *Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English* (1985) refined the term within an African literary context, asserting that Womanism encompasses both racial and gender consciousness. Ogun-dipe-Leslie's *Re-Creating Ourselves* (1994) was the pioneering work that gave rise to Stiwanism, promoting the participation of African women in economic and political reform. In a similar vein, Kolawole's *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997) and Nnaemeka's *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way* (2004) have also contributed to African feminist Movements discourses. Others, like Florence Stratton and Carole Boyce Davies, have critically engaged with gender and power as cross-cutting issues in African literature, making a case for emerging feminist theories.

Womanism in *A Man of the People* captures the totality of Black women's existence through the acknowledgment of their personal, social, and spiritual realities. In *A Man of the People*, three primary female characters express Womanist values:

•**Mrs. Elizabeth Nanga:** Being the wife of the corrupt politician Chief Nanga, Mrs. Nanga adheres to traditional gender roles as a submissive wife and mother. Her character, however, emphasizes the constraints placed on women in a patriarchal society. Her character in the novel emphasizes the expectation that African women must be faithful to their husbands even in the face of exploitation and political corruption.

•**Eunice:** Eunice is a more liberal approach, as she is educated and politically conscious. Her character defies gender norms by speaking up in spaces dominated by men. She will not abide by the passivity historically required of women, embodying the Womanist conviction in women's empowerment and active engagement in changing society.

• **Edna:** At first, Edna is portrayed as a young woman who complies with her arranged marriage to Chief Nanga. Edna, however, goes through a transformation that is in accordance with Womanist ideals of self-discovery and independence. Her ultimate defiance of the marriage indicates a refusal of societal limitations and a quest for personal agency.

All these characters portray the variability of African women's experiences, ranging from subordination to gradual empowerment, thus demonstrating the tenets of Womanism.

### Conclusion

The shift from Womanism to Stiwanism in African literature reflects the changing discussion of gender roles and feminist thought in postcolonial cultures. Achebe's *A Man of the People* is a critical work that responds to this shift, providing a complex representation of African women resisting oppressive systems and seeking agency. Mrs. Elizabeth Nanga, Eunice, and Edna's characters represent the intricacies of Womanist struggles as they strive to redefine themselves within a highly patriarchal society. At the same time, the appearance of Beatrice and Elwa as agents of change is in line with Stiwanism's focus on the role of women actively contributing to constructing political, social, and economic realities.

This literary transformation also mirrors wider feminist movements across Africa, which increasingly seek the incorporation of women into decision-making circles as opposed to a simple rejection of male dominance. Achebe's portrayal of these issues highlights the need for developing feminist paradigms that acknowledge the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts of African societies. In addition, his novel invites readers to reconsider gender relations outside Western feminist paradigms, adopting a more inclusive and

community-oriented approach.

Ultimately, *A Man of the People* joins the larger pool of African literature that dissolves traditional notions of gender expectations and encourages gender equality. Tracing the history from Womanism to Stiwanism, Achebe's novel restates the thesis that African women are not docile players on the stage of history but participating actors in progress towards society. The novel's longevity in the reader's conscience derives from the power to engage today's audience on gender, power, and societal change in Africa and other places.

### Works Cited

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