

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*



Chioma Chinedu- Oko¹, Uche Ken Chukwu², Chukwueke Chukwuka Akuchukwu³

^{1,3}Department Of Humanities, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri, Nigeria

²Directorate Of General Studies, Federal University Of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

ABSTRACT: This paper examined the place of the womb as a representative of ecological cohesion. Using the selected text, the paper explored the didactic role of literature, essentially from the purview of imparting on the youth and the adolescent; and based on this background, the paper made use of a literary text, *Save the African Womb*, which is one of the Government recommended texts for students at the junior secondary level of education in Nigeria. The adolescent and youth stage in human development, no doubt, is critical in the social, moral, cultural, intellectual, and psychological education and formation. Again, the paper advanced from the understanding that literature as a special area of writing thrives in the indirect expression of ideas and messages. As much as a literary writer sets to communicate his or her literary messages, such are often allegorically embedded, demanding the creative ability of the reader to decode and sieve the messages from the twined knot in the writer's language choices. To be able to do this in our paper, we adopted the eclectic approach in the selection of theoretical framework, considering the fact that the paper involves a cross disciplinary adventure. The paper thus adopted principally, the semiotic theory, and then the eco-feminist theory as relevant theories. Part of the findings of the paper is that the writer represented the importance of the womb using different manners of signification, both the literal and the semiotic. The conclusion of the paper is that the womb is central to the woman's position as unique biological specie. The womb is also critical in the discussion of the overall human nature, and the need for mutual co-existence in the ecology of human existence. Therefore, the text can be read from the viewpoint of fostering a solution to the social tensions which often arise in the society.

KEYWORDS: Womb, woman, Africa, ecology, literature

INTRODUCTION

Literature is most often described as creative work or artistic recreation of life. Against such descriptions, what comes to mind when literature is mentioned is the entertainment job of literature. But literature performs other functions. It records history; it projects culture; it is a course of study capable of offering career fulfillment; it is also educative. We can further expand the latter to include the teaching of how language functions in actual use. This can be done by appraising how writers manipulate the resources of the chosen language to communicate their literary messages. One can also focus attention on how the messages help in teaching the reader the experiences of life through the experiences of the characters. In real terms, none of the two functions is independent of the other. We can not access the message of a text except through evaluating the language of the text. On the other hand, language is used in literature because there is message to convey. The concern of our paper is also on the latter, that is, exploring how literature exposes us to the realities of life, expecting us to draw lessons and experiences from the fictional or non-fictional beings in the work. This is called literary didacticism.

Didactic literature according to Abrams and Harpham (2009, p.88) is that which "is designed to expound a branch of knowledge, or else to embody, in imaginative and fictional form, a moral, religious, or philosophical doctrine or theme". Didactic function of literature expands the purpose of literature beyond mere artistic pleasure. This shows that literature can entertain as well as teach, in addition its fundamental role as a recreation or mirror of the society.

Because we believe that literature teaches, and as we also agree that literature mirrors the society, it means that even in its fictive nature, a literary work contains human lessons which the reader is expected to draw from the surface story. It is against this background that this paper examines the issue of securing the ecology of existence through the womb as captured in the selected text.

The concept of ecology presupposes that the nature and survival of each member of the ecosystem depends on the nature and survival of the other members. As such, a threat to one becomes a threat to the others. Human being is only a member of the tangible part of the ecology. But we also remember that human beings depend on the culture of the society, on religion, and other non-tangible

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*

aspects of the ecology, for social cohesion, for peace and survival. Human beings also depend on the natural ecology, the flora and fauna, the biotic and aquatic, for survival. Similarly, none of these can exist or survive without the contributions of the human..

The focus of our paper is on the representation of the womb in the selected literary work. The paper explores the concept of the womb from the literal and the semiotic, from the surface and allegorical to explain how the protection of the womb serves as the base for human protection as enunciated in the selected literary work.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Let us examine some of the concepts that are important to the exploration of the paper. They include: gender, womb, and ecology.

Womb

is primarily a part of the human body. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, international student's edition, describes womb as "the organ in woman and female animals in which babies develop before they are born". But from our knowledge of semiotics in linguistics, the dictionary explanation here is just one aspect of the womb as a signifier. The meaning can be expanded by considering other ideas that can possibly come to our mind when womb is mentioned. Womb is one of the organs that differentiate the male from the female, as the male do not carry babies. It therefore suggests femaleness in the categorization of the human specie. Also, a woman who loses her womb is assumed to have lost the essence of her femaleness. The physiological features of human beings help in assigning roles and responsibilities. In the procreation assignment, each (male and female) knows the role to play and what to produce, and the womb is cardinal to the role and responsibilities of the female.

Again, womb is not only a physical organ in human being. It can metaphorically connote the source of life. From the Biblical account of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, he was made human by passing through the womb to acquire human life. Thus, it can be said that where there is no womb, there is no human life. It is in the context of possibilities of extended meanings of the word that we examine it in this paper.

Gender

is also a common word in the English language lexicon. It is used to differentiate male (masculine gender) from female (feminine gender), the non-specifics (common or neuter genders). However in the literary and other areas that require critical evaluation of expressions, the meaning of gender transcends the biological status of maleness or femaleness. For instance, in feminism, which is a branch of literary critical discourse, there is a difference between sex (someone's biological or physiological status of being male or female), and gender (someone's socially and culturally assigned roles and positions for being male or female). Such socio-cultural configuration of gender is addressed in different fields and from different perspectives. In the context of our paper, we examine it from the viewpoint of the socio-culturally assigned functions of the womb as can be deduced from the selected text.

Ecology

on its part is primarily a term used in biology and environmental studies to describe the complex web of relationships found among organisms that live in an environment (Uwadiogwu and Nkwa, 2012). However, the meaning has also expanded to include both the organisms and other non-tangible constituents of the environment such as culture, and how such interact with the tangible constituents. The presupposition is that the attitude and actions of the tangible organisms are influenced and motivated by the non-tangible constituents of the environment. For instance, the attitude of human beings to one another, or to the natural environment, to a great extent is influenced by the culture, values, belief systems, and religion of the environment. It is against this background that this paper connects ecology and gender (feminism) to ascertain how both interplay in shaping the interpretations of the womb in the selected text.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical frameworks upon which the paper is based are the semiotic theory in linguistics, and eco-feminism. The theories are preferred because of the nature of the paper which has bearing on language, ecology and feminism. Semiotic theory in linguistics asserts that language is made up of signs and symbols expressed in different manners, either vocally or graphically. It is predicated on the idea that meaning-making has varying modes of realisation. Sign is basic to semiotics, and Littlejohn and Foss (2008) describes sign as "stimulus designating or indicating some other condition – just as when smoke indicates the presence of fire". Thus, semiotics refers to how signs come to represent objects, ideas, stimulus, situations, feelings and conditions outside of themselves.

Different orientations or models have evolved under the theory of semiotics, but this paper is anchored on Pierce's model which accounts for sign and meaning-making through signification, representation, reference and meaning (Okeke and Chukwu, 2015, p75). According to Pierce, meaning-making through sign involves three basic things: a sign, an object, and an interpretant. Sign is the word (signifier), object is whatever that is signified by the signifier, take for instance, where the word pig calls to mind an object

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*

or figure. Interpretant on the other hand is the understanding that we have of the relationship between the sign (word) and the signifier (pig). Thus, the meaning of the sign is understood from the interpretation given to it by the user.

Pierce's model helps us to understand meaning-making based on context. It shows that meaning is dynamic because the connection between sign and signifier can be influenced by context of use. If we take the pig example given above, pig as a word has fixed literal meaning as a type of animal, but its semiotic interpretation can be approached differently based on the circumstance under which the word is used. For instance, we can view it from the feeling of dirt, ugliness and so on. These are possible interpretations that can be evoked by the word pig, depending on the context of use.

Situating all these within the thrust of our paper, we set to examine the word "womb" and its various interpretations as used the novel under study. Womb is a sign (a word). It is a signifier (an object that is in the human body). However, as interpretant, it can be understood from different viewpoints, either directly or indirectly. Thus, it is from these various standpoints of interpretation that we shall examine it, and its role in ensuring peace and social cohesion.

Ecofeminism on the other hand is derived from ecology (eco) and feminism. It is an ideology predicated on the connection between the principles of ecological discourse and feminism. The proposition is that ecological discourse should not be limited to the degradation, devastation and pollution of the environment by human activities. Rather, it should connect the interrogation of the degradation of one gender, where the social structure permits the subjugation of one gender.

These two theories are germane to the thrust of the paper which examines the concept of the womb from different perspectives, but particularly from its significance to the ecological harmony and cohesion in the society. Examining this from the language choice of the selected writer, the paper sets to show how literature helps in shaping and reshaping the consciousness of people. The use of womb in the selected text, and its various possible interpretations is a potent instrument of orientation to the teenagers and youths who have been constantly described as the leaders of tomorrow.

Save the African Womb and the Story in it

Save the African Womb by Nicole Chinelo is one of the literary texts recommended for the junior secondary students in Nigeria. Its major thrust according to the blurb of the text is to enlighten the public that a simple error can trigger a chain of reactions that is capable of ruining the entire life of a person. The human person thus becomes a micro society where a simple error by an individual or a group of individuals can ruin the entire fabric of the society.

The conflicts of the novel centre on the protagonist, Agnes, who lost her womb as a result of serial abortions. In the story, Agnes in her teenage rascality gets pregnant and the man who is responsible denies responsibility, and abandons her. She gives birth to a female child, and supposing that she cannot take care of her, drops her at the gate of a pastor. The pastor and her wife find the child and adopt her. Agnes goes back to her loose life, but in a twist of fate, encounters Davies, a responsible and rich man, and they get married. Years after, Agnes' womb cannot hold previous conceptions. This time, she conceives and the doctors stitched the womb to help it carry the pregnancy. Unfortunately again, the womb miscarries the baby. To make the matter worse, her doctor, Mitini, advises that for her to survive, her womb must be cut off because it has ruptured so badly. Both Agnes and her mother are devastated. How can she explain this to the husband? Does it mean her fate to be a mother, a complete woman is dashed?

From another direction is the story of the family of Bishop Abraham of the Oil of Angels Ministries, whose daughter Barakemi, is raped at a youth convention by the youth leader of the church, Joseph. Barakemi shows signs of sickness and is taken to Dr. Ikimi. The result of the test shows that Barakemi is pregnant. The parents are devastated. They request for an abortion but the doctor refuses in an attempt to protect his job. As an alternative, they agree with the doctor to hide the daughter's pregnancy from public knowledge; and to sell the baby after delivery. Barakemi is sent to Lagos to live with the grandmother. Dr. Ikimi arranges with Agnes to buy Barakemi's baby on delivery. She is also given injection that helps to jut her tummy as if she is pregnant, in order to give the husband the false impression that the pregnancy was not lost.

Joseph on his part is remorseful of his dirty act. He wants to see Barakemi, at least, to apologize to her, but he does not know where she has gone to. From Lagos, Barakemi and her grandmother decide to involve the man responsible for the pregnancy. Joseph is therefore contacted and he flies to Lagos and reunites with Barakemi, though without the knowledge of the latter's parents. At the point of implementing the hatched plan of giving the baby to Agnes, she is arrested and jailed. While in jail, she is visited by a Christian group. She confesses the sins of her past and requests them to help her locate the child she abandoned at the gate of a pastor. The aim is to help her apologize to the girl. The group succeeds in doing so, and it becomes a revelation that almost ruins the life of the girl, but in a sudden twist, establishes a stronger bond between the couple and the girl.

From the story, we see the simple but careless action of Agnes bringing multiplier effects that consume many other people. The question becomes how relevant this could be in ensuring peace and cohesion in the society. Let us consider this within the frame of the concept of the womb in the text.

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*

Analyses

To help us achieve the purpose of this paper, we shall examine the concept of the womb from the following perspectives: physiological, socio-political, cultural, ideological, economic, and cosmic. This is in line with our choice theory of semiotics, and its process of meaning-making involving a connection among sign, signifier and interpretant..

The first is womb as a physiological object. The novel identifies the womb as a physiological feature in man, connected to sexual activities. This of course, is the general or commonplace understanding or interpretant of the word. Regrettably, sexual activity has pervasive implications on the social fabric of Nigeria, and this forms the central message of the novel. In what can be regarded as authorial voice, the novel admits that “Save the African Womb is not just a title of a book but a movement that has been set in motion by some women in Nigeria whose vision is to save the African womb from **sexual immorality and other acts of indecency**” (*Save the African Womb*, SAW p.1, my highlight for emphasis).

We notice the humanization of Africa in this excerpt. Africa is a continent, a non-human that has been attributed with a human physiological feature (womb). Thus, the understanding or interpretant of the womb in this context should go beyond the mere physiological, especially, as a connection is also drawn among sex, morality, decency. Morality and decency belong to the non-tangible part of the ecology of human existence. So the message of the novel becomes justified by the presence of the negative aspects of these features in the society: immorality instead of morality, indecency instead of decency.

To expand the significance of the womb beyond the physiological, the novel states that “the prevalence of cases of abortion among young ones cannot be unconnected to the carelessness of the entire society” (SAW, P1). This connection of the physiological (abortion) to the social (carelessness) is of interest to the paper. It substantiates the supposition of the paper that every action or inaction by any member of the ecosystem would have a multiplier effect on other members. Here, abortion which is a physiological activity is connected to other aspects of social existence.

The novel also connects the womb to the sociopolitical viewpoint, thereby creating another kind of womb. Consider this excerpt: “The womb is not only a gift to the woman but to the entire human race. Every kind of revolution starts from the womb of an individual of any given society. Any kind of change people expect depends on the destined womb of a destined girl” (SAW, p 1). Notice the types of womb described in this excerpt.

- The womb is not only a gift to the woman but to the entire human race.
- Every kind of revolution starts from the womb of an individual of any given society
- Any kind of change people expect depends on the destined womb of a destined girl

First, there is the womb which every individual in the society carries, irrespective of gender. Secondly, there is the womb which is limited to the female. However, there is also the sociopolitical womb implicated in the choice of words “revolution” and “change”. These two words share paradigmatic relationship, and can be logically connected in antithetical pattern of signification with “immorality” and “indecency” identified in the earlier excerpts.

Womb is also used as an ideological container in the novel. Let us consider the following:

“The womb of a girl is like a **gate** to her nation or continent. Every **great idea** ever seen in the world today **had passed through the womb of a girl** somewhere, ideas rule the world” (SAW, p.2)

“Do you know that **destinies are formed in the womb**? Yes! in your womb. It is **the efficacy of your womb that will determine the future seeds of Africa**. If great seeds must be born to save Africa from total collapse, then great seeds must be born by saved and divine wombs” (SAW, p.2, my highlight).

We see from the above excerpts that the novel presents an ideological or philosophical view of womb. Some of the statements may sound paradoxical though. However, if great ideas and destinies reside in human beings, and every human being must pass through a womb, it then means that the great ideas and destinies also pass through the womb. By implication, when the womb is used to kill or abort, it is not only the physical foetus that is terminated, rather the destiny and great ideas that ought to have matured with the foetus.

There is also the economic perspective of the womb. Consider the following lamentation by Agnes in the novel. It was given at the point her ruptured womb has been removed: “What will happen to all the money I have acquired? Who will inherit the money and wealth my husband has made? I have everything, yet I’m very sad. The removal of my womb is a final blow, a case of hopelessness”. Note that what is removed is the physiological womb, but the lamentation centres on economic futility. Thus, there is a connection between the two as mutually exclusive, where the absence of one means the absence of the other. The absence of the physiological womb implicates the absence of economic joy. This is why in one of the excerpts already quoted in the novel describes the womb as the gate through which other positive values enter: “The womb of a girl is like a ‘gate’ to her nation or continent” (p.2).

The novel also gives womb a cosmic or spiritual interpretation. When Bishop Abraham suggests to Dr. Ikimi to help them abort their daughter’s pregnancy, Dr Ikimi refuses, and remembers the consequences on his friends who had earlier indulged in the practice:

Many of his colleagues who indulged in that **illegal and wicked practice did not father any child**. Those two events of his life taught him serious lessons, which made him never

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*

to abort any child except the one that was already dead in the womb. It would only be on cleaning of the womb (SAW, p.19).

From this excerpt, it is evident that the womb is also the gate to cosmic blessing and or curse. Each of them depends on one's actions.

Significance of the Novel to Ecological Harmony

We have identified several interpretants of the womb in the novel. Most importantly, the novel presents these shades of interpretant as intertwining, such that when one aspect is negatively affected, the others become dysfunctional. For instance, after removing Agnes ruptured womb, the doctor discharges her from the hospital, believing that she has been cured of her health challenge. But Agnes' view in the following excerpt shows that the doctor failed to understand the ideas of sickness and treatment:

Will you discharge me without also treating me to relieve me of the pains in the heart? You are a doctor who is supposed to cure people of infirmities. Please cure my headache. It is killing gradually. I may look physically fit to go home, but maggots are already feasting on my heart (SAW, P.9, my underline for emphasis).

From Agnes' experience, we observe that when one part of the body is disturbed, it affects the other parts. The underlined are paradigms of sickness affecting different parts of the body. Thus, the operations of the human body represent the complex web of connections in the ecology of existence. It means that when one aspect of the society is dysfunctional, it negates the operations of the other parts. Note that only the womb of Agnes is removed, but her entire body architecture, the physical, biological, mental, are affected.

This is also the case with the experience of Bishop Abraham who believes that the pregnancy of his child signifies the total collapse of his family, his pride, his person. Consider this excerpt:

I am finished, my life is finished. What will I tell the world? What will I tell those who look up to me for decency? What will I tell my congregation? That I cannot control my own family? Not just my family, my only child (SAW, p.13).

The carelessness that resulted to the pregnancy was committed by the leader of the youths in his church who raped her daughter, but the multiplier effects extend to the girl, himself, his family, his church, and the society at large. The failure of the young man to control himself is a mark of the failure of the society.

In the same vein, we consider that a single mistake by Agnes as a teenager ruined her entire life existence. Not only that, it ruined the life and expectations of the husband. Their marriage is also ruined. Again, the profession of the doctor who agrees to give her a baby is also ruined. Agnes is jailed and wishes to apologise to the little girl she abandoned years back, and this inconveniences the evangelism group that offers to help, as well as jolts the foundation and cohesion of the family that adopted the girl. Such chain of devastation suggests the interdependence in the ecology of existence.

SUMMARY

We shall summarize this paper by reminding ourselves of the functions of literature which include recreation of the society, social commentary, aesthetic appeal, and didactic propagation. We have examined how the selected writer explored social realities from the experiences of the characters and the inherent social conflicts in the novel. From the view point of literature as a didactic instrument, we have also seen how the experiences of the characters teach us that every individual is a player in the game of building a social structure, where the action or inaction of one impacts on the other members. Furthermore, we have seen that the major tool of literature is language manipulation to suit the literary message, and the context of use. Through linguistic manipulations, the novelist has been able to redefine the concept of womb.

CONCLUSION

The paper, therefore, concludes that the idea of the womb transcends the conventional view of a physical or biological feature. The novel has shown that the womb is the gate to peace and security in the society; it is the gate to ideas and the destiny that shape the society. When the womb ruptures, the society also ruptures. Conversely, when the womb is protected, the society is also protected.

REFERENCES

- 1) Chinelo, N. (2016). *Save the African womb*. Lagos: Diamond Queen
- 2) Chukwu, K.U (2014) Re-defining culture and the ecology of barrenness in Gloria Ernest-Samuel's *...Ihuoma my dear*. *Journal of Nigerian languages and culture*, Vol. 15, No. 1. Pp 91-106
- 3) Littejohn, S.W, & Foss, K.A (2008). *Theories of human communication* (9th ed.). Belmont: Thomson and Wadsworth.
- 4) Okeke, F.A & Chukwu, K.U (2015) Language use in communication: a semiotic perspective in selected Igbo cultural symbolic objects. *ANSU journal of language and literature studies*, Vol. 1, No 2. Pp71-82

The Womb and the Representation of Ecological Cohesion: A Linguistic Reading of Nicole Chinelo's *Save the African Womb*

- 5) *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*, international student's edition (8th ed). Hornby, A.S (Ed).
- 6) Uwadiogwu, Z & Amadi, N (2012). *Environmental health and sanitation terminologies*. Aba: Eagle publishers



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution–Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.