



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Representation of Women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Things Fall Apart, one of the best novels of Africa and Chinua Achebe, delineates life, values social system and culture of Nigeria and Africa. Though novel was published in 1958 just before Nigeria's independence the story was set in the 1890s when colonisers set their foot on the African continent with their religion and administration. In this novel Achebe portrays his women characters as they were represented at that time in Igbo society. The role of women changes in Nigeria as the time passes as we find in the other novels of him. The women play a very significant and proactive role in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of Nigeria with the passage of time. At the surface level, the role of women in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is unfairly limited in terms of their authority and power. But when we dig deeper into the novel we come know that women play important roles and hold some very important positions such as: spiritually as the priestess; symbolically as the goddess of the earth; and literally as the nurtures of the Igbo people, the care takers of the yam crops, mothers and educators of the children, and social reformer.

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (TFA), an archetypal modern African novel in English, delineates the history, politics, values, and culture of Africa in general and that of Nigerian Igbo society in particular. Albeit the novel was published just before the independence of Nigeria in 1960, the story of the novel was set in early part of the 19th century when the British colonizers set their foot on the African continent. As the colonizers entered Africa they began to divide people in the name of god and civilization in order to get political power into their hand as they did in their other colonies across the world. The innocent native people who were unaware of their evil intention became the easy prey and things began to fall apart as Obierika rightly says in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel also answers the question, Can the subaltern speak? The subaltern can not only speak, but also can speak very well. The negative terms of the binary opposition like dirty, weak, uncivilized, darkness, barbaric, ugly, noise et al. are associated with the subaltern and marginalized people, that is non-white people across the world. This opinion can be changed only when subjugated subaltern speaks and tells his side of the story to the world. As one of the Igbo proverbs says until the lion (colonized) produces its own historian, the story of the hunt glorifies only the hunter(colonizer). Chinua Achebe is absolutely right when he says: 'African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently has a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty,

that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people had but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain.'

The story of the novel surrounds around ups and downs of the life of Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, and tragic fall of him in the end in the Igbo community of Umuofia in Eastern Nigeria. Okonkwo was a very hard working man; he became one of influential leaders of his community by dint of his hard work. He detested idleness and considered it a sin against humanity. He was very angry whenever any of his family members found idle and punished them severely; because his father an idle, did not get any title and was called a woman, and became the laughing stock of the people. That's why Okonkwo disliked whatever his father liked. He came to prominence as a wrestler, married three women, got two titles and became a powerful leader of the community. After the arrival of British colonizers, the Igbo community begins fall apart as they converted many people to their religion, started their own judiciary and administrative set up. Okonkwo could not get the support of his people, after his arrival from Mbanta, to fight against the white men and commits suicide. Even though he did not die with dignity according to Igbo culture; he died for dignity as he had never wanted to get arrested by the white men. In this novel Achebe portrays his women characters as they were represented at that time in Igbo society. The role of women changes in Nigeria as the time passes as we find in the other novels of him. The women play a very significant and proactive role in the socio-economic, political and cultural life of Nigeria with the passage of time.

Polygamy was practiced in Igbo society, Nigeria and Africa and many countries in the world. Polygamy (mostly polygyny as in TFA) is one of the worst ways to subjugate, to deny specific identity to women, and to exploit them and keep them in the subaltern position perpetually, and polygamy also denies individual identity to women which men enjoy since time immemorial. It is because of this reason that all the modern democracies have abandoned polygamy. There are few countries and tribes where polygamy still exists and the condition of women in those places is as bad as women in Igbo tribe of Nigeria that has been delineated in *Things Fall Apart*. There are many titles for men which were conferred on them according to their achievement in various socio-political activities. But for women there is no such thing as title and they are not allowed participate socio-political activities and decision making even in matters concerning their children; and they are confined to child bearing and child caring, and household activities as animals are subjected to and are not given any freedom. If a woman asked a question she was told to shut her mouth as Okonkwo did when his first wife asked about Ikemefuna; if man asked his wife's opinion before taking any decision, he was considered not man enough. Marrying more women was thought to be a symbol of prosperity and respect in Igbo society and men are proud of it but it is not same when it comes to women.

The practice of bride price like groom price or dowry system was one of the evil systems followed in the Igbo society. Though it was called bride's price, the amount was collected and used by the male members of the family. In this system, a woman was sold like an animal in the market bargaining in one way or the other for the maximum benefit. This system does not allow the women to marry who they like. For example: Ekwefi could not marry Okonkwo because he could not pay the bride price. Hence, she has to marry somebody else whom she does not like and has to undergo mental torture. At last she runs away from her husband's house and lives with Okonkwo. She has to undergo many trials and tribulations only because of bride price. The same thing is happening to women in the present-day dowry system. Many women were tortured, killed, and burnt alive only because they could not bring dowry from time to time. Whether it is bride price or dowry system, it was women folk who suffered in the past and will suffer in future as well because this evil practice will not go away; it remains in one form or the other and does not allow women to live with dignity and peacefully. It is because of this attitude of the patriarchal society, the female foeticide is very common in all countries especially less developed countries.

Man was not punished for his mistakes; but when a woman makes any mistake she brutally beaten like an animal. When a man kills a woman he was not punished for his wrong instead a small boy and girl were given in compensation for killing. In a patriarchal Igbo society, a woman has no right over her children. She can't do anything even when her child was being killed, tortured and beaten by the male member of the society as happens in the case of Ikemefuna who was killed for no mistake of his own. Even in England in the

19th century married woman had no legal right over her children or any other thing for that matter. Charlotte Bronte discovered before her death that her husband owned the copyright of her novels as well as everything she earned. Woman was not allowed to play central role in the various aspects of mundane life and was pushed to the periphery and brutally punished for not complying patriarchal orders and she had to live in constant fear of being beaten for one reason or the other. Margaret Cavendish was apt when she complained in 1655 in her work *Philosophical and physical opinions* about the Subjugated condition of women: 'We are kept like birds in cages to hop up and down in our houses, not suffered to fly abroad... we are shut out of all power and authority, by reasons we are never employed either in civil matters or martial affairs, our counsels are despised and laughed at, the best of our actions are trodden down with scorn, by the overweening conceit men have of themselves and through the despisement of us'. Men think that children belong to the father and his side and not to the mother and her relatives and men think that they could do anything with children as Ikemefuna was killed for the mistake of his father; not his. The stories told by the women to her children are stupid and useless and that of men dealing with violence and bloodshed are good and will make them men.

A lazy, idle and stupid man was called an *agbala* or a woman; a woman was synonymous with such man. The negative terms of binary opposition are always associated with women not only in Igbo culture and Africa but also in all cultures across the world irrespective its economic status and scientific development. *Agbala* also means a man without titles and specific identification. It means identification is denied to women and they are not allowed to express their opinion on any issue. They are not allowed participate in decision making even day today matter; they were forced to do any work even if that work is detrimental to their mental and physical health. The women in the colonised countries are double oppressed: on the one hand, they are oppressed by patriarchal force, on the other they are oppressed by oppressive colonial force.

Agbala is an ambiguous term used in the patriarchal society and language. The very patriarchal language is phallogocentric (phallus centred or male centred) where women are under privileged and kept in the periphery since ages together. Few privileged positions were given to women and those women are manipulated by patriarchal power in order to continue male dominance. In all mythologies across the world, certain stories are invented to control and subjugate women perpetually. In stories, they are respected and revered but actual life they are exploited in all possible ways. In this novel the priestess of Hills and Caves is a woman to communicate with gods and ancestors but the condition women in the Igbo society is very bad and precarious. The women are not allowed to sit and eat with men; they have to eat and drink after men had finished. Even the crops are divided as male and female. Big crops are male and the small ones are called female crops. A lazy unsuccessful man without a title was called a woman; that means woman is lazy, idle and unsuccessful and could not achieve anything in life, and they exist like animals 'These meeting is for men' (TFA). Men never asked women's opinion before taking any decision. When Obierika said Ogbuefi Ndule never did anything without telling his wife, Ozoemena, Okonkwo reply was: 'I did not know that; I thought he was a strong man in his youth'. It was thought that such a man was not a man enough. It was also thought that man owned everything: property, wife, children, customs and nature et al.

Women are portrayed as emotional, kind, caring and friendly as one can see in how Okonkwo first wife takes care of Ikefemuna who is not own son and how Ezinma takes care of Okonkwo especially when he is not well after killing Ikefemuna. On the other hand, men are angry as Okonkwo who beats his wives for silly reason like she has not prepared food and cutting a leaf from the banana tree. He even once almost killed his wife to death for speaking lightly about his shooting skills. It seems that the men are in search for an excuse to beat their wives and children. Wife beating is a common phenomenon practised across the world and it has become a part of their culture. When a severe case of wife beating comes before the *Egwugwu*, he gave judgement in favour of the wife and, but the end of the trial a man wondered 'why such a trifle should come before the *eqwugwu*.' On the one hand women are called goddess, on the other women are ill-treated, beaten and subjected to exploitation beyond explanation. A woman has no place in Igbo society in terms of justice and hence a higher authority to be sought. Thus, it is argued that 'Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. All wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper'. Hence women's roles in the social

milieu are restricted domestic activities and are not taken into consideration while making decisions on any matter.

Men invented many myths in order to confine women to oppressed state; for women, it is not the question of asserting themselves as women but of becoming full scale human beings.

Women are projected as they are possessed with evil forces and god in all the cultures. In some case women are beaten and killed or executed for doing so or for involving in black magic or witch hunt. Even in Bedlam, England in the seventeenth century women were tired and incarcerated for witchcraft and prophecy as female prophecy was considered crazy and unchristian. Grumbling and beating women was a sign of strength in Igbo society. A man is not really a man if he could not control or rule his women and children especially his wives. In a patriarchal society women were also ingrained with patriarchal values and these values are project as universal values in order use women to control the women folk as Europeans projected European values and culture as universal values and culture in order to colonise, subjugate and exploit African, Asian and South American countries.

The twins born to a woman were thrown into the evil forest in the name of god, religion or some superstitious beliefs; there is no sympathy for suffering, feelings and opinions of women and were not taken into consideration before taking such decisions. There are many such superstitious beliefs which cause pain and suffering to women and it is such customs that forced many people to convert to another religion as in the case of Nneka. Her twins were thrown into the evil forest and she was left grieve stricken after that she converted into Christianity in order to escape such evil and inhuman customs. No society survives for long time if it does not treat all the people equally irrespective gender, caste, creed, and colour. The Igbo tribe fallen apart more because of its own superstitious beliefs and customs than the external forces as we also see in Achebe's another novel *Arrow of God*. The white men cashed in on the weaknesses of the native people and colonised them in Africa, Asia and South American countries.

Men are not happy with the way she is or with what she is. If she is calm and composed she is called inactive, if she is very active she is boyish or she should have been a boy as Okonkwo repeatedly repeats in the novel about Ezinma: 'she should have been a boy'. She is considered emotional lacking in rationality. It is common notion in men that a woman is temptress, seducer and cause of all unwanted things in the universe. Eve is a temptress who led the humanity astray as in *The Bible and The Paradise Lost*, Sita is the cause of problem Rama has to face and Surpanaka is the cause of downfall of Ravana and Lanka and has had supernatural powers to influence and control men in *The Ramayana*. Draupadi is cause of war between brothers in *The Mahabharatha*. Helen in the cause fall of Troy in *The Iliad*. Man is always in search of one or the other reason to make derogatory remarks on women to subjugate and exploit them. The negative terms of the binary oppositions like fear, failure, pain, death, weakness are associated with women. When he was weak and disturbed after killing women he asks himself: 'When did you become fearing old woman'. Okonkwo's son Nwoye does not show interest in violent stories, hence he thinks he had begotten a woman for a son. Okonkwo ponders how he, 'a flaming fire, could have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate'. and when in Mbanta, he calls them womanly clan because they do not take any action against white man who was converting his people and insulting their gods and ancestors. The python, which was considered sacred, was called our father not our mother. The negative terms of the binary oppositions are always associated with women in all countries across the world irrespective of scientific and economic development.

The inhuman practice of mutilating body of children in the name of custom and ward off evil forces is adding insult to the injury or rubbing salt to the wound. Woman is already in pain because death of her child, mutilating and dragging it to the evil forest like a dead animal is adding to her grief. Women are projected as possessed by evil powers as in the case of Ezinma. The suffering of women at the time of child birth and lack of proper medicine to treat fatal diseases makes the life even more vulnerable. Moreover, beating wife is common phenomenon and it has become almost the part of Igbo culture. Many myths, stories, prophecies were created in order to prolong the patriarchal domination of over women to exploit them to the maximum in the name of culture, civilisation, values, morality, spirituality et al.

The motherly affection of women towards their children is unconditional, unquestionable and immeasurable. She could do anything in order to protect them, even if she has to go against the wish of the god who created everything in the world including human beings. Ekwefi runs after the priestess in order to protect Ezinma when she was carried to the Shrine of Hills and Caves. When Okonkwo beats Nwoye, he runs into his mother's hut for protection. Albeit Igbo tribe is patriarchal in nature, it is mother, mother's land and her relatives who protect when one is in trouble. When Okonkwo kills Ezeudu's son accidentally he had to go to his motherland for seven years as it was the tradition in Igbo tribe. It is mother who embraces children when they are in distress. It was the mother of spirits that lamented for the death of an *egwugwu* at night. It shows mother is concerned for welfare and development of her children. Because of all these superior qualities Mother is Supreme. As Uchendu says: 'It is true that a child belongs to his father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks its sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why mother is supreme' (TFA).

There are two kinds of crime: male crime and female crime. Women's names are involved in crime as well. If one is involved in male crime, he was rewarded with titles but if one commits female crime as Okonkwo did by killing someone accidentally he should be abandoned from village for seven years. It was the justice of earth goddess against goddess-female- awarding the punishment. Women and goddesses are used as a tool in a clever and cunning way to continue the male dominance. A woman does not belong to her husband's place albeit she lives and bears children for her husband. Okonkwo's mother was buried in her native place because a woman has no right to be buried in her husband's place. She was always thought of as an outsider and not a part of the family of her husband.

In all the cultures and in all the ages there was/is more stress on the virginity and chastity of women. Unfortunately, this was insisted by the female members of the family even in a polygynous society like Igbo tribe where men marry more than one woman and it is a sign of prosperity and honour for them but it is not the same with women. If a woman does the same thing it was a matter of great shame and such women are insulted, beaten and even killed in the name of family honour. Even in the twenty-first century honour killing-killing of those women who marry against the wishes of male members of their family- common phenomenon in many countries of the world including India. In many Muslim countries as well as non-Muslim countries if a woman loses her virginity before marriage she will be divorced or killed; and if she was found having extra-marital affairs she will be killed by pelting stones at her in public.

After coming from prison Okonkwo thinks that men of his tribe are not men they used to be: 'Worthy men are no more'. They are not brave today, it means they have become woman-like and clan has become womanly clan. Okonkwo's disgrace and death in the novel is due to his disregard for feminine values in the society.

At the surface level, the role of women in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is unfairly limited in terms of their authority and power. But when we dig deeper into the novel we come to know that women play important roles and hold some very important positions such as: spiritually as the priestess; symbolically as the goddess of the earth; and literally as the nurturers of the Igbo people, the care-takers of the yam crops, mothers and educators of the children and social reformer.

Women performed the role of priestess. One of the chief gods/goddesses' of Igbo clan is *Agbala*. The priestess of this god and main Oracle of Hills and Caves was a woman. When Okonkwo's father was alive the priestess was called *Chika* and later *Chielo*. She was a full of power her god and she was greatly feared and people approached her as she only could communicate with god. A woman with such supernatural power was duly and readily respected by men.

Reverence for women in the novel is delineated in the representation of earth goddess, *Ani*. *Ani*, a female goddess, is portrayed as playing an important role in the life of people than any other deity. She was the supreme god of morality and conduct. Besides, she was in close communion with the departed souls of ancestors whose bodies have been committed to earth. *Ani's* power is further illustrated through her role in the yam harvest, the king of the crops. It is important that all the members of the family as well as tribe should

observe the Week of Peace prior to harvest in order to honour the great goddess of earth without whose blessing crop will not grow. If a female spirit plays such an important role in the success of king crop, yam, it is an indication to show the deep-rooted power of women in the survival and continuance of the society. When Okonkwo breaks the peace of Ani, Ezeani scolds him: 'The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse give you us her increase and we shall all perish.' Such is the significant role played by a female goddess for the protection of the clan.

We can also see women as educators of their children through storytelling. We also know that the morality and values are not taught but caught in stories. It is through these stories that children learnt many important lessons about human conditions, relationships, and social values, to develop artistic consciousness of the children and Igbo women played a very significant in the facilitation of learning which is very vital to children to function within the Igbo culture.

Women also play the role of social reformer in the novel. There are many evil practices and customs, and superstitious beliefs which are detrimental for the development of the society. Okonkwo, the flaming fire and great fighter; Obierika, the gentleman of the novel, do not oppose such practices and beliefs. They remain quiet or involve in such practices and customs as in the case of throwing away the twins into the evil forest, beating women mercilessly, killing an innocent boy like Ikemefuna for no mistake of his; mutilating the body of dead small children et. al. But Nneka, a woman, who is considered a weak, protests against such practices and customs by converting to Christianity and tries to change the people as Raja Ram Mohan Roy did in the case Sati System, Basavanna, 11th century social reformer, tried to fight against caste system, and Ambedkar and Gandhi who tried eradicate the caste system in the twentieth century. Hence, woman has the calibre to reform the society for the better future of the posterity.

Okonkwo does not plead anybody, male or female, for anything at any point in the novel except Chielo, woman and priestess, when he pleads her to come in the morning to take Ezinma and it was a woman who orders and warns Okonkwo, a flaming fire: 'Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep. But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter... The priestess screamed. Beware, Okonkwo! She warned'. This is to say that woman is seen as the protector in the Igbo society and hence ultimate power and superior. Logically woman is the basic foundation of the people and the clan. They are the ones who nurture and take care of the people and hence are not the insignificant powerless individuals. This fact brings out the point that despite their unappreciated presence women are still make their presence felt within the Igbo community.

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