

## **GENDER POLITICS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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### **Abstract**

*In the present paper an attempt has been made to illustrate, explore and express the image of women in Chinua Achebe's novel, Things Fall Apart. The author has portrayed female characters in the novel keeping in view the prevailing social and cultural conditions of the society. The writer has also delineated the women characters in the postcolonial environment. As a significant postcolonial writer, Achebe has vividly and graphically described the socio-cultural values of the Igbo community in Nigeria, Africa. Moreover, the analysis of the female characters in the novel has been done through the perspective of postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism finds the relation and intersection between postcolonialism and feminism. Despite the domination of males in the society, the author shows that in traditional patriarchal culture as in the novel, women are portrayed happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly, beaten, exploited and victimized on the basis of sex and gender. Their life seems barren as they are not allowed to participate in the decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. However, some other interesting findings are that the women also have big role in the belief system of the community, and in Achebe's novel, we find an authentic and realistic portrayal of all this.*

*Keywords: Postcolonial Feminism, Traditional Patriarchal Culture, Community.*

Without any shadow of doubt, the African novel is generally linked with the delineation of various kinds of cultural clashes as well as conflicts. In the novel, one finds the stage of disagreement between tradition and modernity, but the central concern remains between the individual and the society. It is the society which triumphs over the individuals in the African novel. But, the case is different with European novel where the victory is one the individual over the society.

There is no doubt in denying the fact that Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is a powerful dramatization of clash between the African culture and the European aspects of life. The novel is a skilful castigation of how things fall apart in the African culture with the advent of the white man. The white men, in the beginning, went to the countries they had colonized as missionaries preaching their religion, but by means of their clever manipulation, they got absolute authority.

Besides a postcolonial novel, *Things Fall Apart* also portrays the society dominated by patriarchal conventions. The females, thus, were victimized and exploited from two angles-first, they were the victims of British regime, the common fate of the Africans, second being females, they were tortured and harassed mentally as well physically by their husbands in the social set-up.

*Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to present authentically the social, political, economic and religious aspects of life of the native Igbo tribe. As man-women relationships and the place of women in the society is a significant part of social life; Achebe presents this relationship very vividly. He presents beautifully the paradox of this otherwise patriarchal society in which mother is considered supreme. Throughout the novel, we find that in the society women are subservient to men, but after Okonkwo's forced shift to Mbanta, we find that mother is held in high esteem in the society.

In the Igbo culture, we come across the system of 'moiety' and exogamy which propounds that every man in the clan has a fatherland as well as motherland. When Okonkwo commits murder incidentally, he is supposed to migrate to Mbanta, his motherland, as a means of punishment. But, a minute study of the novel *Things Fall Apart* reveals the fact that even if the motherland is exclusively meant for providing comfort and solace to a maternal nephew (Okonkwo) when he is in distress, the same place also observes the idea of female discrimination can be perceived against those women who are helpless or unfortunate enough to repeatedly give birth to twins. Such women, as an imposition of punishment by the society, are invariably cast out in the forest to die, either of hunger or being eaten by wild animals.

From the ironical point of view, the first woman in Mbanta who converses to Christianity, is called Nneka or 'mother is supreme' when her rights to motherhood are taken away by her husband's owing to now no longer comprehensible and therefore, outmoded. These are some set of rules which automatically and conventionally can be seen operating whenever a 'deviation or transgression' occurs in the process of daily living in the social circle. This shows a strong adherence to patriarchal norms where the males are superior at every level.

Not only has this, but also in Okonkwo's motherland, the females had to pass the test of virginity through 'isa-ifi' ceremony as we find in chapter fourteen of the book. This practice is an age-old practice by virtue of which prior to their marriage, it is obligatory for females (a bride) to prove that since her 'uri' ceremony, she is a virgin and has not slept with any man before her marriage. In umuada, the oldest married daughter has been assigned this duty, by this custom, the role of the inquisitor at the isa-ifi ceremony. Very minutely and incisively, she interrogates newly bride-to-be and asks her prescribed questions (no deviation permitted in this matters). It is also presumed that any false or wrong answers given by the bride would earn her the wrath of god on her. It is in this way that the bride-to-be, an unlettered woman is permitted to come cleaned. It is very biased and discriminated ritual and rite which is not to be followed by grooms -to-be this virginity test. So, the gender norms are different and vary from one sex to another.

We also perceive gender politics in case of the tribes in the lower Nigeria Delta region as the people of this place are highly orthodox and patriarchal. Rather, than 'gender politics'(gender is a construct, which is borrowed from grammar not a traditional one in the pre-literate society), it is exclusion patriarchy where the women are considered as second sex.

Despite all these practices of female discrimination prevalent in the Igbo society, there a females deity, Ani, who is known as the earth goddess owning all lands. She is worshipped by the clan. We also come to know about Chielo, the female priestess who wields unquestionable power in her possessed role as a deity carrying oracle's orders, the selfsame Chielo, in her daily quotidian, life is no different from the other women in the clan. She, too, has to cook, scour

pots and pans, sow and reap women's crops like cassav, coco-yam and green beans, birth and rear children. A woman's work in a patriarchal society is never done or comes to an end.

In Igbo society, polygamy is prevalent and the richer, the stronger and the more successful a man is, the greater is the number of wives he has married. Okonkwo has three wives, and Nwakibie has nine wives. Among wives, the eldest is given the greatest regard and she bears the anklet symbolic of the title of her husband. In a gathering, the eldest one is first of all offered palm from wives and then others are offered according to their seniority. In this society, there is the custom of paying bride price which is decided through negotiation between the two parties. Marriages take place between families of almost equal social status and economic condition. Ekwefi, the second wife of Okonkwo, could not marry him because at that time, Okonkwo was not in a position to pay the sufficient bride-price. She had to marry some other person from whom she ran away afterwards. The custom and procedure of bride price are well presented at the occasion of the engagement of Obierika's daughter.

The husband-wife relationships and the place of women in this relationship become evident in Achebe's own words in chapter second with the opening sentence, "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand." His wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper. Beating his wives is not an unusual matter. His wife's staying in her neighbour's house a little longer than the latter than he expected, and her failure to cook food well in time is the cause enough to raise his rage. He is so furious that he even forgets that it is "a Week of Peace" and gives his wife a sound thrashing. No doubt, he has to pay, but it is not for beating his wife, but having violated the peace of the week. When Ezinma fell ill, her mother becomes the target of Okonkwo's anger for being careless towards the child. No advice from his wife is valuable for Okonkwo.

While in Mbanta, he tells his wife to cook three goats for the feast he has to arrange for his uncle and cousins. Ekwefi, his second wife, suggests that two goats will be sufficient. Okonkwo's answer is "I have every right. I have the right to decide it. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle." The only duty of the wives is to cook food in time and send one portion of it to the husband well in time. In this way, to obey their husbands unquestionably and to look after the children is done by females without complaints. Nowhere in the novel do we find a reference to a wife fighting for her rights.

In one of the incidents that reflect male-domination in the society, Okonkwo asks his senior wife to look after a lad when she asked about the time of his stay with them. He shouted at her and ordered her not to ask about what he had said: "He belongs to the clan: he told her, so look after him." Is he staying along with us she asked, "Do what you are told woman." It shows how strictly the males' orders were carried out by females.

Women used to be submissive and meek before their husbands which can be seen when Okonkwo again thunders and stammers, "When do you become one of the elder of Amofia". He didn't only shout on her, but also despised her by saying, "When do you become one of the elders of Amofia" so as to ask him about the length of his stay. If a man has four wives, they should drink in order: the senior wife first and then the others. Okonkwo asked his first wife to drink first, then the second one, and at last, the third one. This is the only situation in which Chinua Achebe gives a woman her right: "A Nasi is the first wife and the others couldn't drink before her, and so they stood waiting."

However, woman as a mother is given due regards in this otherwise male-dominated society. Mother is considered to be supreme and motherland is a place where a person finds shelter once he has committed serious crime, and is banished from his fatherland. A woman after death is buried in her motherland has to leave his village. Okonkwo kills Ezeudu's son by chance and has to leave his village along with his wife and children for seven years. He finds haven (shelter) in Mbanta, the village his mother hailed from and there he is received with open arms by his maternal uncle and cousins.

The place which a mother enjoyed as a mother in Igbo society is clear in the words of Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle: "It is true that a child belongs to its father land, but when a father beats his child it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are goods and life is sweet, but when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland...."

In Igbo society, a woman is a symbol of weakness and infirmity whereas man is a symbol of strength and boldness. Any prior showing weakness is called a woman. The word 'Agbala' implies woman and, at the same time, it means a man who has taken no title. Okonkwo grieves over the fact that his father was an 'Agbala'. When Ikemefuna is to be killed, some men of the village refuse to go for this act and are looked down upon as woman. When Obierika tells Okonkwo how the people of Abam had been killed by the Christians, the question is "Have the men of Abam turned women?" Okonkwo feels bad that Nwoye is a weak person and wishes that his daughter Ezinma should have been a boy.

Although women are associated with weakness in Igbo society, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves has a woman, Chielo as a priestess and she is the most powerful person in Umuofia. Although man is considered to be stronger, we do not find anywhere in the novel women being discriminated against. The daughters of Okonkwo-particularly, Ezinma are given due love and affection.

There is also a practice of divorce in Igbo society which shows that a woman if unhappy and dissatisfied with her husband, could attain freedom from the bondage of marriage. If husband and wife do not get on well with each other, the case is brought to before the Egwigwu, the so called spirit of the ancestors and the case is decided publicly after listening to the pleas and complains of both the sides. Moreover, we find some women going against tradition and asserting their liberty. Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, has run away from her husband and married Okonkwo whom she had liked for his strength. Some women join the Christian Church, most of those being the victims of the evils custom of throwing away twins in the forest of evil.

Women also enjoy a place of eminence as we find predominantly in oral culture, they have to transmit the younger generation (their children) both apparent and the hidden messages through tales. In this way, there is a very little authority that the female enjoy in the Igbo culture. It is to be witnessed in case of Ekwefi who emerges as a spirited woman. She is able to make a choice of a man of her like and dislike. Otherwise, the females in the clan are supposed to give birth to children and to ensure the clan's continuity. A childless woman in this society is seen with utter disgust and contempt at personal as well as social level. This is what we find chapter nine where she retrospects to her days before the birth and survival of Ezinma. When her children die one after the other, it brings the agony of a thwarted motherhood to the fore in her anxieties was the fate of her children.

Thus, although in Igbo society, there is male-domination in husband-wife relationship, we find some freedom enjoyed by women and it is evident that there is some awakening among women regarding their rights.

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