

Things Fall Apart: A Reinterpretation of the Women Characters

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Abstract: *Things Fall Apart* has mostly been regarded as a 'sexist' text in that it portrays a phallogentric society where women are regarded as mere 'objects' or 'property' of their husbands, and we cannot but say that the portrayal is a true and honest representation of Igbo society. But an undercurrent of the writer's endeavour to present women as individual human beings and important members of society is deducible from the very beginning of the novel, which runs in parallel with the patriarchal ideology prevalent in the society at large. One of the vital points to be argued in this regard is his portrayal of two female characters Ekwefi and Ezinma who possess strong personality and have their own ways of doing things and who even play a significant role in sustaining the family and social values. Moreover, this portrayal has further been fortified by the hero's response towards these two women, which Achebe has conjoined with the structural design of the novel. So it is important to note how Achebe has made Okonkwo, one of the chief adherents of phallogentric ideology, recognize and appreciate the wisdom and courage of his second wife and her daughter, and rely on them in his sheer needs. Similarly important is the fact that he is sustained by the female power during the most critical phase of his life--his exile to his motherland in the second part of the novel.

Achebe starts his masterpiece with a description of his hero Okonkwo, a stout and proud man, who has acquired a position of high social esteem because of his enormous physical strength and courage:

He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. (3)¹

This very description of a typical African male introduces us to a phallogentric society where honour is to be earned through a demonstration of vigour. So, it is clear from the very beginning that women, naturally considered weak, have no honour or respect in a society. And so far as we can see, women have been consigned to a negative and marginal status and their role is basically limited to the household management without any access to decision making. Thus, we see

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them "cooking, plaiting their hair, decorating their bodies, dancing, running from egwugwu, and being given in marriage" (Okpewho 176). Not only that, the idea of 'femaleness' as being inferior is so deeply rooted among Igbo people that we may easily perceive the existing phallogocentric code of the society influencing the vocabulary of its language and the values of the people. One of such wide-ranging analogy between women and inferiority could be understood in the very description of the yam: "Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (16). Again, women and cowardliness are synonymous to the people, and Okonkwo being the principal believes in it. Time and again he expresses his dissatisfaction with the clan's cowardly acceptance of the white and terms it as a womanly trait:

He mourned for the warlike men of Umofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women. (129)

But, before criticizing this social relegation of women as the 'other' in the novel we have to consider the fact that this novel does not offer us an extensive portrayal of women from a variety of angles which could have shown us various important roles they have been playing in controlling the Igbo economy and solving numerous family disputes. Because Achebe has described "his mission in writing *Things Fall Apart* as being to teach other Africans that their past was neither as savage nor as benighted as the colonizers represented it to be" (Okpewho 172), so his basic focus was to present the rich cultural tradition of Igbo society and the gradual collapse of its social harmony at the advent of the colonizers. Here I want to refer to Rhonda Cobham who has argued that "literature, like anthropology or history, is a form of selective representation, replete with its inherent assumption about authenticity and objectivity" (Okpewho 178). So, Achebe's job was a tough one, because he had to be authentic in his depiction of the Igbo society, yet convey his attitude towards women to the readers in the limited scope and space that his central aim had allowed him.

So even though we argue that women play a vital role in maintaining the cultural tradition of the Igbo society some of which Achebe has shown and some others he couldn't, as is argued by Rhonda Cobham, we cannot yet deny the fact that the society Achebe has portrayed seems misogynistic in every way. But my point of emphasis is the author himself, his view of womanhood which he has not failed to incorporate in the novel, and we can't possibly ignore the amalgamation of his view and the view of Igbo society which brings harmony to the novel. Amidst this background of gender discrimination we can see two women emerging slowly through the progression of the novel to catch the readers' attention--one of them being Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, and the other her daughter Ezinma, Okonkwo's favourite daughter. And it is important to note that attention is first drawn to them through Okonkwo's reflection on them, though he never expresses his special love or affection for them. My argument is that Achebe had a special

care in depicting women in this novel, and has done so by developing these two untraditional characters and also by making Okonkwo dependent on the female power in all crucial circumstances of his life.

In order to argue my point, it is therefore important to show how powerful this male-constituted mechanism is that establishes and perpetuates the dominance of men and the subordination of women in the Igbo land. The readers are first shocked into this realization by noticing the way women are mentioned in the novel. At first we get a casual reference to Okonkwo's wives when the narrator mentions them in an ironic counterpoint to the hero's gigantic figure and his name and fame earned due to that very figure. But then the second reference to women makes it clear that the society does not distinguish women as individual human entities, but rather places them side by side with other possessions men in a society have, say yams: "He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives" (5). Again we know that Okonkwo is considered a wealthy and honourable man in Umuofia because of his courageous achievements in the wars and his possessions of two big barns and three wives. The way the omniscient narrator mentions 'wives' as an indicator of the social status of the heroic sons of the soil may appall a modern reader, but that is exactly how honour was to be earned in the Igbo society, and Achebe is so authentic in presenting his tradition to his readers that "his representation of the past has become a substitute for the reality" (Okpewho 178).

There are numerous instances of discrimination against women in terms of gender, which is "a matter of something learned or acquired, 'a construct,'" and not of "sex, which is a natural biological product" (Barry 130). Belittling women in varied degrees is common to find in all patriarchal societies, and the Igbo society is no exception. So Okonkwo in his childhood learned that his father was an 'agbala', meaning he had no title, and 'agbala' being another name for a woman, it is not very difficult for us to remember that a man who has no title has no respect in the Igbo society and has the same status as women in general have. Again we see how pleased Okonkwo is at his eldest son Nwoye when 'he would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles' (37). Okonkwo is happy to see this habit growing in his son because

That showed that in time he would be able to control his women folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. (37)

The way the Igbo society categorizes stories as being masculine and feminine is another notable point enabling us to construe the rampant gender discrimination of that society. The earlier type consists of violence and bloodshed and the latter is full of imagination and allegorical significance. It is also important to notice that the female stories are told to the children, and as they grow up, the male

children are gradually exposed to masculine stories, and so from then they start despising the female stories which deal with absurd and unreal situations. The society also distinguishes ceremonies as we see that some of them are meant for the men and some other for the women. A gathering at the village 'oli' for administering justice by the 'egwugwu' is for the men, whereas the ceremony of 'uri' is for the women where the central figures are the bride and her mother. There are similar categories in crime also—male crime and female crime, the earlier being more severe and the latter less severe. Punishments also vary on the basis of the type of crime.

Besides these general references of women's inferiority, there are several instances of particular events that contribute to the same strain of thought. It is not a matter of surprise then to see the way women are presented before their prospective in-laws for marriage negotiations:

The suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe. (49)

And this is how Oberika's daughter is given in marriage to her in-laws:

We are giving you our daughter today. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town. (83)

We can also get a clear idea of what role women had in their house from Okonkwo's comment to his first wife when he gives her the responsibility of looking after Ikemefuna. As she asks him how long Ikemefuna will stay with them, Okonkwo replies: 'Do what you are told, woman,.....When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umofia?' (11) It is a man's job to take important family decisions and to maintain his family. So on the occasion of the emergence of the *egwugwu* this is how women are mentioned to be decorating the *egwugwu* house:

These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan. (63)

But Achebe has balanced this depiction of women as 'feminine'- having 'a set of culturally defined characteristics' (Barry 122) through the two bold female characters in the novel who might seem to be revolutionary in that setting. From the beginning these two women are depicted as untraditional women in an Igbo society, because they are not feeble but brave and, most importantly, very sure of themselves. Ekwefi is introduced on the eve of the New Yam Festival when the entire Umofia is eagerly waiting and enthusiastically preparing for the festival. Okonkwo, who is never very enthusiastic about feast, gives vent to his suppressed anger at seeing some of the banana leaves being cut without his

permission. As he inquires about who did it, Ekwefi answers that she cut a few leaves to wrap some food, and Okonkwo gives her a sound beating without any further argument. This admission of having done something undesirable to her guardian is by no means a courageous act taken in isolation, but if we judge it in the situational context it becomes crucial to understand her character. From the very beginning of the novel the narrator has given us an idea of Okonkwo's temperament:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand his wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. (9)

This knowledge makes us understand the boldness of her character and throughout the novel we see in her a woman who is not afraid of anyone, even of the priestess of *Agbala*. Here in this situation when Okonkwo inquires about who cut the leaves, a hush falls on the compound immediately. It is in this moment of terror that Ekwefi announces that she cut the leaves. As Okonkwo beats her, neither of his wives dares 'interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, 'It is enough, Okonkwo' from a reasonable distance' (27). And not only that, after beating her as Okonkwo asks Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, Ekwefi murmurs something about guns that never delivered a shot since Okonkwo has been a failure as a hunter. But unfortunately he hears her comment, and runs madly for his gun and shoots her, though she is not killed fortunately. Ekwefi is again mentioned when Okonkwo is roused one morning by someone banging on his door. As he asks who it is, the narrator mentions 'He knew it must be Ekwefi. Of his three wives Ekwefi was the only one who would have the audacity to bang on his door' (53).

When we see Ekwefi the second time in the novel, we get an insight into her character. Here she is seen to be finishing all her household works in order to go to the wrestling match. Here in an attempt to portray the popularity of this match the narrator mentions that it is difficult to say which the people enjoy more--the feasting or the wrestling match. While such is the condition of women in society, Ekwefi is presented with a sharp contrast. 'But there was one woman who had no doubt whatever in her mind. . . . There was no festival in all the season of the year which gave her as much pleasure as the wrestling match' (28). Achebe is far from portraying a typical feminine heroine--weak, soft and beautiful. Rather, Ekwefi is a woman full of determination, very much aware of what she wants. She has married Okonkwo for love. Though she was not able to marry him when she fell in love with him because he was too poor to pay her bride price, her love for him was so strong that she left her first husband and came to Okonkwo. Though Achebe has given us this very vital information very casually, it is not very usual for a woman to leave her husband in that society. In fact, we can only realize how unusual it is for a woman to leave her husband on her own if we

compare her with another woman Mabafo who also leaves her husband Uzowulu for excessive beating. In Mabafo's case it is her brothers who took her away from her husband because his beating exceeded the margin of tolerance--he beat her until she miscarried. And even then, she did not run away from her husband. Her brothers took her away.

Again we are presented with a very elaborate description of Ekwefi's long walk in pursuit of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, who takes Ezinma to the cave in the middle of the night. As Chielo approaches Okonkwo's compound she first meets him outside his hut and says that Agbala wants to see Ezinma. Despite Okonkwo's pleading she comes to Ekwefi's hut and announces the wish of Agbala. As Ekwefi declares that she will follow her, Chielo threatens her for her audacity:

'I will come with you too,' Ekwefi said firmly. 'Tufia-a! the priestess cursed, her voice cracking like the angry bark of thunder in the dry season. 'How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger. (72)

After Chielo leaves, she gets confused for a moment, but instead of being afraid of Chielo's threat and comforted by Nwoye's mother that the priestess will soon bring Ezinma back, she, all of a sudden, makes up her mind to follow her and leaves the compound. Here we can argue that in her brave decision to follow the priestess, her motherly love expresses itself against all odds. But the noteworthy fact here is that Okonkwo, in spite of all his courage and special love for Ezinma, doesn't follow Chielo immediately. And if he did, it would be the perfect kind of example of paternal protection. And we see him doing it, after Ekwefi has left the house. From the beginning Ekwefi is determined to protect her daughter from any possible danger. That is why we have to notice how she proposes to follow Chielo. The narrator says that she declares it 'firmly', and from the very beginning we have been introduced to her firm character. After she starts to follow the priestess, the narrator gives us a detailed description of the terror of a dark night and an insight into Ekwefi's thoughts. The usual connection between darkness and terror plays a vital role in portraying Ekwefi's turbulent mind concerned with the fate of her only child. One remarkable feature of this episode is that Achebe now and again emphasizes Ekwefi's fear about the dark night and of the consequences of her following Chielo if the latter sees her behind her. She is so afraid that at a point she feels like calling out to Chielo 'for companionship and human sympathy' (75). But she immediately realizes that there is no humanity in Chielo, who sits with her in the market and sometimes brings bean-cakes for Ezinma, and 'Cheilo was not a woman that night' (75). And again she reflects on the rationality of her decision to come after the priestess, because she

realizes she won't be able to stop anything happening to her daughter by only going after her. After all, 'She would not dare to enter the underground caves' (76). But in contradiction to her thought, as the priestess enters the cave Ekwefi runs towards the hole of the cave as though to stop them. This bravery on her part is again heightened by the author when he makes Okonkwo say that he thought she was going into the shrine with Chielo. Throughout the description of the episode the author has not used a single word to indicate her extraordinary courage except for these words from Okonkwo's mouth. And lastly, when he asks her to go home and wants to wait alone at the mouth of the cave for Ezinma, she denies going home and taking rest, and says she too will wait and thus she shares the responsibility with her husband to safeguard their daughter.

The same kind of emphasis is given to Ezinma's character. The difference is that the narrator gives clearer references to her firmness and prudence. In case of Ekwefi we are presented with incidents that show her difference in terms of her courage and boldness among women. But Ezinma, from the very beginning, doesn't act in a feminine way and the most prominent feature of her character is that she is very wise. The first comment of the narrator on her is: 'Her daughter was only ten years old but she was wiser than her years' (29). We come to know this fact when Ekwefi and her daughter are preparing the afternoon meal on the day of the wrestling match. After that Ezinma takes food for her father in his obi. It is then that we are introduced with her unwomanly nature. As she waits for her father to finish his dish brought by her half-sister Obiageli, Okonkwo shouts:

'Sit like a woman!' Okonkwo shouted at her. Ezinma brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her. (32)

But though he rebukes Ezinma for not behaving in the typical feminine way, inwardly he is not at all irritated or disturbed by her 'unwomanly' behaviour as he is by his eldest son Nwoye's lack of manly strength and enthusiasm. Then after a reasonable pause she asks for her father's permission to carry his chair for him to the wrestling ground, and Okonkwo doesn't allow her to do it, because it is a boy's job. But Okonkwo, a loyal son of Igbo land and its tradition, merely denies her the request, but inwardly is not very angry at her for not being like a typical woman. Thus, we can argue that she has been given the qualities of a boy, like wisdom and concern to sustain the family reputation etc., which should have been present in Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son. Okonkwo time and again repents why she wasn't born a boy. After Okonkwo goes to his motherland for seven years we again meet Ezinma, now a healthy, buoyant maiden. Okonkwo becomes increasingly dependent on her after Nwoye joins the Christians:

He never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl. Of all his children she alone understood his every mood. A bond of sympathy had grown between them as years had passed. (122)

We are told that she becomes one of the most beautiful girls in Mabanta during her father's exile and is called the 'Crystal of Beauty'(122). So many young men and prosperous middle-aged men of Mabanta propose marriage to her. But she refuses them all, because one day her father calls her and says that he will be happy if she marries in Umofia when they return home. That is enough for her and she sees clearly all the thoughts and hidden meanings behind these few words and convinces her sister to refuse all marriage proposals at Mabanta. And we are again left with Okonkwo's thought: 'I wish she were a boy' (122). We, therefore, see that in spite of being a girl she takes the responsibility of sustaining the family values through her prudence and firmness. After Okonkwo along with five other leaders of Umofia are imprisoned at the District Commissioner's headquarters, Ezinma pays a visit to the family of her future husband and returns home, which is a very unusual act on the part of a woman in that society, because a woman is not expected to have any concern or responsibility to protect the family from any danger. On the contrary, she is expected to wait for things to be done by the male members of her family. But just after returning she goes to Obierika to ask what the men of Umofia are going to do about it. So we may say that she is doing all the things that Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son is supposed to do.

Apart from the portrayal of these two women, there are other elements in the novel from which we can deduce that Achebe had a special care in his portrayal of women in this novel. We may say that Okonkwo is at one extreme of that society looking at women through a phallogocentric lens. But there are worse men like Ozowulu whose beating of his wife goes to the extent of his wife's miscarriage. Again, there are men like Ndulue who was so attached to his first wife Ozoemena that he couldn't do anything without telling her. His love for his wife is so much known to the village that there is a saying in Umofia that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind, and this view is enhanced by the fact that they die on the same day. But in case of Okonkwo, if we want to understand his view of women we need to delve deep into his psychology. He is a self-made man who did not inherit anything from his father; rather he had to work hard from a very early age for sustaining his family consisting of his father, mother, and sisters. To him, his father is the very epitome of weakness and idleness, who was only successful in borrowing money from various men of the village and piling up his heap of debt. And naturally, Okonkwo, a man of action, could not stand his father and was ashamed of him. His dislike for his father is so strong that it turns out to be an everlasting terror for him. And throughout his whole life he denies having inherited any trait whatsoever of his father, most evidently weakness, in his character .

But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. (9-10)

So he identifies physical strength with courage and manliness, and weakness with cowardice and womanhood. And it is only natural for him to regret the fact that Ezinma is not a boy, despite the fact that she has the courage and wisdom needed to rule and sustain a family. And interestingly enough, he doesn't disapprove of her qualities because she is a woman; rather we see that he can always depend on her without any hesitation. It is also remarkable that Okonkwo is specially attached to Ekwefi, a very brave and bold woman, who, among his wives, has the audacity to face him during his fit of anger, which others cannot even think of. It would have been very usual for him, the way Achebe has developed his character, to be disgusted with her because his very mindset is similar to the king of Tennyson's "The Princess" – "Man with the head and woman with the heart / Man to command and woman to obey" (Abrams 904). But we see that he is especially fond of these two women who do not conform to his definition of women. Why has Achebe shown such a paradoxical aspect of the hero's character? The answer is, we might say, his humane appreciation of women.

Achebe's appreciation of women is not only reflected in the development of these two women and the hero's attachment to them, but also in the structure of the whole novel. The biggest example to support my argument here is Okonkwo's exile. This exile serves Achebe three purposes. Firstly, through this incident Achebe shows a man's relation to his mother's clan in the Igbo society, which is a very important aspect of the Igbo tradition. Secondly, it creates the gap between Okonkwo and his clan which gradually results into his ultimate shock at the advent of colonial power. Thirdly, it shows how the female power sustains Okonkwo during the sad phase of his life. During his exile, after Nwoye joins the Christian missionaries, he becomes solely dependent on his daughters, especially Ezinma. As he ponders on how to regain his lost position in Umuofia after a long gap of seven years, his chief hope is his two beautiful daughters who would definitely attract men of title and wealth as their suitors. Though he has other plans like building his compound in a more magnificent scale, building huts for two more wives, initiating his sons to the *ozo* society etc., his most immediate and practical hope rests on the wellbeing of his daughters.

Therefore, reading this great novel as a sexist text would be an inadequate approach negating the author's endeavour to overcome the challenges, posed by the context of the novel, in conveying the message to his modern readers that women are not mere negative objects. And I want to argue that he has done so very successfully even though it requires a very sharp observation on the part of a reader to recognize Achebe's subtle indications mixed with the prevalent notions of the society presented in the novel.

Notes

1. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1958. All subsequent quotes are taken from this edition of the text and the pages are cited in the parentheses.

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