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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Exploring the Ibo Culture and the Aspect of Gender Bias

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Things Fall Apart is a 1958 English novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. In the novel, Achebe explains the role of women in pre-colonial Africa. Women are relegated to an inferior position throughout the novel. Their status has been degraded. Gender divisions are a misconception of the patriarchy. But Okonkwo believes in traditional gender divisions. Okonkwo wishes that his favorite child, Enzima, should have been a boy. Okonkwo shouts at her, "Sit like a woman." (Achebe 40). When she offers to bring a chair for him he replies, "No, that is a boy's job." (Achebe 41). On the other hand, his son Nwoye was a disappointment to him because he has taken after his grandfather Unoka and has feelings of love and affection in him. For same reason Okonkwo had always resented his father Unoka also. Unoka was improvident. For him he was a failure.

Marginalization is the social process of being relegated to the fringe of society. One such example of marginalization is the marginalization of women. This paper is an attempt to explore the Ibo culture and to discuss women as a marginalized group in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Things Fall Apart is a 1958 English novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Achebe is indebted to Yeats for the title as it has been taken from Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*. Achebe is a fastidious, skillful artist and garnered more critical attention than any other African writer. His reputation was soon established after his novel *Things Fall Apart*. He made a considerable influence over young African writers. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English. It seeks to discover the cultural zeitgeist of its society. Critics tend to agree that no African novelist writing in English has surpassed Achebe's achievement in *Things Fall Apart*. *Things Fall Apart* is a milestone in African literature. It is considered to be Achebe's magnum opus. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's sincere attempt to guide people in their struggle to make their freedom meaningful, functional and relevant. He is a committed writer who believes it is his duty to serve his society. *Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to redeem the dignity of Africa. Achebe shows, "Africa was not a primordial void but has a history, a religion and a civilization." (Reddy 46). It sheds light on Nigerian history. Past is depicted enthusiastically and vividly. It is not a past to lament over. Achebe has maintained pathos and ethos of original language. He attempts to preserve the artistic world of the African past. He has convinced his readers that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity." (Innes and Lindfors 65). He portrays the psychological problems of a generation of Africans suddenly plunged into a modern world. Whatever was written earlier about Africa was to depict it

as a dark continent. It in turn symbolizes people who are primitive, irrational and superstitious without any reason and logic. In fact racists have labeled them as savage. And it was considered White Man's Burden to enlighten such ignorant people. Achebe reminds that Africa had a rich past and a legacy and that not only the whites have a right to have history and a rich past.

The title implies that the center is weak and cannot hold. Cultures crumble and civilizations disintegrate in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel is set in a traditional Ibo village community at the turn of the century when the first European missionaries and administrative officials were beginning to encroach inland. "The motifs of power run as an undercurrent in the novel." (Reddy 20). Achebe's incisive analysis of the politics of power and psychology of corruption holds a mirror to the sociopolitical scenario prevalent in the Third World today. *Things Fall Apart* is a story of Okonkwo, a famous warrior and expert farmer who has risen from humble origins to become a wealthy and respected leader of his clan. His entire life has been a struggle to achieve status, and he has almost attained a position of preeminence when he by chance kills a kinsman. For this crime he has to live in exile for seven years. He goes to his motherland where his uncle Uchendu receives him. One day Uchendu asks Okonkwo, "We all know that a child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka- 'Mother is Supreme.' Why is that?" (Achebe 121). Okonkwo was unable to answer him and then Uchendu explains,

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his father 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. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (Achebe 122).

But Okonkwo gave no response. When he returns after seven years he finds things have changed drastically. White missionaries have established themselves and some people of his village have converted to their religion. Okonkwo tries to rouse his clan to take action against these foreigners and their institutions. He was ready to stand for and fight for his community but others did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. Okonkwo's tragic mood indicates an affirmation of the validity of the past. And movement of the plot indicates acceptance of the present as it is. "Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women." (Achebe 165). In a rage he kills one of the white men and then in order to avoid the disgrace of being caught at the hands of white men he commits suicide. There is a contrast in the way he lived his life and in the way he faces death. His death marks that unchecked manliness complex may result in a disaster. When his kinsmen find his dead body they refuse to touch it and instead asks the white men to bury him. On being asked the reason one of them explains, "It is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the

Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it.” (Achebe 186).

Throughout the novel, Okonkwo is presented as a man whose life is ruled by an overriding passion to become successful, powerful and rich and to become one of the lords of the clan of Umuofia. Okonkwo suffers from a tragic flaw. His flaw is his inability to adjust. He has misguided pride. His obsession with proving and preserving his manliness dominates his entire life. For instance he drinks in heads. Okonkwo has no intellect. He only has muscle power. “Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wife especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children.” (Achebe 12). No episode dramatizes Okonkwo’s obsession with manliness more clearly than the killing of Ikemefuna who was like a son to him. He does so as “he was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe 55). He took it as his bravery but on the contrary it’s an act of weakness because only cowardice is involved in killing and not manliness. Afterwards when he feels sad about the whole incident he questions himself, “When did you become a shivering old woman... you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.” (Achebe 59). He talks in such a manner as if a man cannot regret his actions and has no right to feel depressed about anything. He resorts to violence in order to assert his manliness. He fails to understand that greatness lies not in the so called masculine qualities but in the combination of the masculine and the feminine qualities. For him, it’s a stigma for a man to have such qualities. He was afraid to show love and affection because he thinks his society would look down upon him. He thinks anger is the only emotion worth demonstrating. His friend Obierika also tries to show him that manliness does not mean male domination but his gendered vision does not allow him to accept any new idea. Okonkwo makes fun of an elder named Ogbuefi who was very much attached to his wife during his life. Okonkwo’s uncouth mind could not think of the possibility of such harmony between the husband and the wife. When Obierika tells him that this old man never did anything without letting his wife know about it, Okonkwo replies, “I thought he was a strong man.” (Achebe 62). His rigidity allows no room for change and as result things fall apart.

Achebe explains the role of women in pre-colonial Africa. Blacks are marginalized but women are subjugated not only as blacks but as women also. Women are relegated to an inferior position throughout the novel. They are regarded as mere appendage to a man. They are treated as chattels. Their status has been degraded. Gender divisions are a misconception of the patriarchy. But Okonkwo believes in traditional gender divisions. In *Things Fall Apart* the number of wives you have affects social status. Okonkwo wishes that his favorite child, Enzima, should have been a boy. Okonkwo shouts at her, “Sit like a woman.” (Achebe 40). When she offers to bring a chair for him he replies, “No, that is a boy’s job.” (Achebe 41). On the other hand, his son Nwoye was a disappointment to him because he has taken after his grandfather Unoka and has feelings of love and affection in him. For the same reason Okonkwo had always resented his father Unoka also. Unoka was improvident. For him he was a failure. Okonkwo encourages Nwoye to sit with him and tells him “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed.” (Achebe 48). “Okonkwo sees things and judge the same from a purely masculine point of view. He

cannot imagine a man endowed with the finer qualities of gentleness and softness. For him these are nothing but feminine traits.”(Reddy 31).

The world in *Things Fall Apart* is an androcentric world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. “The greatness of a man in this society is measured in terms of his muscle power, wealth, titles and number of wives. It is a polygamous society.”(Reddy 30). Men of titles occupy a place of importance in the society and are treated with honor and respect. In *Things Fall Apart* no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children he was not considered to be a man. In *Things Fall Apart*, the authority lies with the men. Women do not have a say in any important matter. The idea of masculinity puts women on a remote margin. They are excluded from political, economic and judicial matters of the community. They are confined to the domestic sphere only. Once Okonkwo’s wife murmurs something about his gun and hunting.

Unfortunately for her, he heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his family. He threw the gun and jumped into the barn, and there lay the woman, very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt. He heaved a heavy sigh and went away with the gun. (Achebe 35).

Thus, we see that her attempt to question anything is immediately castigated. Okonkwo was obsessed with masculinity to the extent that his family, especially his wives suffered greatly at his hand. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo did many things to prove his masculine quality and one such thing that Okonkwo repeatedly did throughout the novel was to beat his wives. The only thing which has significance in his life is masculinity. He demeans everything that is considered feminine. In fact Ibo life is so much gender based that even in case of gods they place a male god at the apex and next in the hierarchy is a female goddess. Moreover they categorize crime as male and female. When Okonkwo kills someone by accident it was called a female crime. Not even the crops are exempted from such discrimination. Yams were an important crop for these people. “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.” (Achebe 30). Okonkwo says, “I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands.” (Achebe 30). This clearly shows the prevailing inequality between the genders in the Ibo community.

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