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Hyper-Masculinity and Gender Stratification in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Things Fall Apart is seminal fictional text by the Nigerian Nobel laureate - Chinua Achebe, published in 1957. It is an account of the African culture, its principles and history, its trials and tribulations in the face of western capitalist colonialism, through an account of an Igbo society situated in that era. This novel is a response as well as a record of the trauma of the tearing apart of a culture, its traditions and values, its institutions and beliefs. The role of women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* appears to be unfairly limited in terms of their authority and power. Not much attention has been paid to it beyond going along with the assumption that this novel presents women as a group with little autonomy and few powers. In every culture, there are different roles that must be fulfilled by the members of its society - one of them, and a very important one is - gender. *Things Fall Apart*, is set in an Igbo village in Nigeria, in a culture that is no exception to this norm. Thus, this paper is an attempt to show the importance of role played by the women in the Igbo society and at the same time, the disavowal of its importance in the patrilineal narrative of the text.

Keywords: Okonkwo, gender, Umuofia, Igbo, patrilineal, society, culture.

1. Introduction

Before discussing the gender roles demonstrated in *Things Fall Apart*, it will be relevant to foreground it in the Igbo culture, of which, it is a saga. At a first glance, the narrative reads like Okonkwo's story of pursuit of his selfhood that is realised in masculinity. In the text, the masculine and feminine social identities and language patterns reflect a distinctly negative social attitude towards femininity, since they associate women with weakness. This novel is a testimony to the social attitudes towards gender. By emphasizing the weakness of femininity and benefits of masculine behaviours, the Igbo people emphasize the gender stratification of their culture and consequently ensure the continuation of patriarchy.

2. Masculinity of Socio-Political Structure

A striking feature of the Igbo was a lack of formalised social and political structure. They lived in autonomous villages, governed by elders. As Ohadike explains it, "Their entire social and political structures revolved around cross-cutting ties. The five most important cross-cutting institutions were the council of elders, age groups, councils of chiefs, women's associations and secret societies" (www.iupui.edu). While men had their own age group associations, title-taking and war - groups, so did women. Women were supposed to possess higher spiritual powers.

Through the telling of Okonkwo's story of his life and his clan, it is precisely demonstrated just how a society creates and fulfils roles for both of the sexes. The gender roles of men and women of the village of *Umuofia* are clearly defined through their division of labour, the attitudes that shape their gender constructs, and the relations that exist between men and women.

3. Attitudes Learnt From Enculturation

The entire text of *Things Fall Apart* is predominantly a man writing for men. Achebe has suffered criticism on this outlook. Rhonda Cobham, for example, insists that "he chooses to ignore the historical contribution of Igbo women to the polity and thereby reinforces a typical Western sexist attitude towards women" (Lindfors 91-100). It is noteworthy that these attitudes contribute by shaping the gender construct and passing of these ideas from one generation to the next. In *Umuofia*, these approaches echo the gender roles as existent in the society. One of the most prominent attitudes in Okonkwo's village is that women are less important than men, but all of this is not to say that women do not play an important role. In this Nigerian sub-culture, women are viewed as weak, and weakness is very much looked down upon. For example, as a young boy, Okonkwo comes to internalize that '*agbala*' was not only another name for a woman; it could also mean a man who had taken no title" (Achebe 13). A man without a title, otherwise known as a failure, is referred to by the same name for a woman and generally demonstrates the underlying attitude concerning women and weakness. Another example is that crimes are classified into two different categories: male and female. After Okonkwo accidentally shoots another clan member, the narrator says, "Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent" (124). This exhibits the ideas of the Igbo clan suggesting that women are seen as indecisive, non-violent beings, whereas men are seen as tough and fierce. In this regard, another significant value throughout the Igbo clan is one concerning masculinity. Masculinity is expected from the men in the clan, and is a necessity if a man desires recognition and status. Achebe writes, "To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (Achebe 28). Men grow up in *Umuofia* learning that strength, alongside masculinity and violence, all go hand-in-hand. Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, as he listens to his father's stories about bloodshed while he was growing up, learns "that it was right to be masculine and to be violent" (Achebe 53). Through the construction and perception of gender, this idea of masculinity is applied to all aspects of Igbo life, including how women are treated by men, in particular, their husbands. To quote from the text of the novel, "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man" (Achebe 53). These ideas and attitudes essentially emphasize the gender roles present in the Igbo clan. These underlying, discreet attitudes give way to a gender construct that significantly affects the entire culture. There are sufficient instances to demonstrate that gender roles are deeply ingrained in the psyche of clansmen and clanswomen. The dialogue in the text is revelatory of the dynamics of status, prestige and power as visualised by the Igbos. First and foremost, there is a quite obvious patrilineal descent system recognized throughout the society. Okonkwo says, "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family" (Achebe 74), in which his friend, Machi, replies, "That cannot be. You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children" (Achebe 74). Their conversation goes to show how deeply their patrilineal descent is entrenched into their society. Men also have the privilege, unlike women, to take titles of status throughout their lifetime, whereas the only significant title a woman will achieve is *agbala*. Men also become a point of reference in identifying a particular woman. Instead of saying the woman's name, they may simply say

“Okonkwo’s wife” or “Nwoye’s sister,” a custom that sheds light on where women stand in Igbo society. By emphasizing the weakness of femininity and the benefits of masculine behaviour the Igbo people emphasize the gender stratification of their culture, and thereby ensure the continuation of patriarchy. It is noteworthy that according to Ohadike, women in Igbo culture enjoyed greater freedom and power before the time in which *Things Fall Apart* is set. He says “Igbo women had their own clubs, age group associations and title associations. Women headed many cultural and political associations just like men. Women were perceived to possess superior spiritual well-being and headed many of the traditional cults and shrines... Women also gained status through trading, farming and weaving and were treated as *ndiogalanya*, wealthy persons (www.iupui.edu). The text, however, contradicts this affirmative description. Marriage is one indicator of how women are viewed in the society. During a wedding that Okonkwo attends, the father of the bride-to-be, Obierika, says, “She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town” (Achebe117). Hence, by implication women are reduced to their function as reproductive beings without a particular identity to declare. Perhaps the most astounding aspect of the gender relations of *Umuofia* is that women must be controlled. During a wrestling match, Achebe writes of Okonkwo, “He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman” (Achebe42). The wife, or wives, or an Ibo clansmen are viewed as assets when they help determine the status of that particular man. A woman who acts out or disobeys her husband might end up as a reflection of the man himself, feminising his status in the society. A result of these very clear gender roles is a social divide between the men and women. Each gender’s responsibilities are not often mixed. When the *egwugwu* set out to settle a dispute in a ceremony, Achebe states that “it was very clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders” (Achebe87). Though this particular ceremony was very prestigious and dealt with the “most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan” (Achebe 88), there are many other demonstrations of the divide between men and women. In spite of all this, the women are still respected for the roles that they do play. An *egwugwu*, a masked spirit, sums it up by saying, “It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman” (Achebe93). The statement emphasizes the weakness of femininity and the benefits of masculine behaviour.

Further instances will help reinforce the point. Nwoye, his son by his first wife, reminds Okonkwo of his father Unoka whom he regards as feeble and consequently, womanish. After hearing of Nwoye's conversion to the Christianity, Okonkwo ponders how he, who is called “a flaming fire” could “have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate?” (Achebe108) On the other hand, he wishes his daughter Ezinma “were a boy” (Achebe122), and he thinks that “she should have been a boy” (Achebe44). He favoured her the most out of all of his children, yet “if Ezinma had been a boy [he] would have been happier.” (Achebe46) After killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo, who cannot understand why he is so distraught, asks himself, “When did you become a shivering old woman?” (Achebe45) When his fellows look as if they were not going to fight against the intruding missionaries, Okonkwo remembers the “days when men were men.” (Achebe141) In his world, Okonkwo is led to define himself and to apprehend his world negatively.

4. Division of Labour

Division of labour is one more aspect of Igbo culture that merits discussion in viewing of gender roles in Igbo culture. The division of labour is primarily accorded according to age and gender. It specifies the tasks that are required of each sex, demonstrates a society’s expectations, and defines the overall roles that people must live up to as being members of

that society. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo village has a division of labour is extremely gendered. Like in many other societies, the women of *Umuofia* do lots of work that centers on cleaning, food preparation, raising children, and household chores, just as the men do much of the heavy labour, farming, and fighting for and defending their clan as needed. For instance, during the Feast of the New Yam, as a part of the preparations, the women “scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light” (Achebe37), before painting the walls with colourful designs. On top of this, the women are also expected. Women are supposed to cook food for the common husband. Once Ojiugo is delayed whilst having her hair braided and Okonwo comes back to a cold *obi*. This discovery “provoked (Okonkwo) to justifiable anger” (Achebe29) in which he later took out on his wife. This scenario demonstrates the role that Okonkwo’s youngest wife, Ojiugo, had in his household, regardless of the fact that she did not satisfy it. However, not all of the food preparation is designated to the women of *Umuofia*. It is split among both genders with a specific set of responsibilities for each. Each gender harvests different types of crops (the men harvest yam, and the women harvest coco-yams, beans, and cassava), however the men are usually the ones butchering the animals, while the women do the rest of the preparation. During a celebration called *uri* (in which a woman’s suitor pays off her bride-price), men and women alike contribute to preparing goats to feast on. After the men have slaughtered the goats, “they washed them and cut them up for the women who prepared the soup” (Achebe114). Aside from daily tasks, when it comes to supporting a family, the people of *Umuofia* have responsibilities that are not unlike many other cultures. The women are tasked with producing, raising, and caring for children, and the men are responsible for providing food and money for their family. A big part of the men’s role is producing yams, a very important crop in the Ibo village. The narrator says, “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed” (33). Division of labour is something that is present in all societies. While there is often times similarities from one culture to the next, ultimately each one is unique and creates roles for men and women alike that end up complimenting each other. These roles and duties give great insight to the inner workings of how a society functions as a whole.

5. Loss of feminine Identity in Aggressive Androcentric Narrative

A prominent point to be made in this context is the absence of the name of Okonkwo’s mother. In effect that between Achebe's under-textualization of Okonkwo's mother and a feminist re-reading of the novel which would foreground her and relocate the "mother-lore" she represents in the intense gender politics of the novel, we encounter an instance of the fundamental challenge posed by issues of gender in postcolonial criticism and scholarship. The point has been repeatedly made that “the nationalist ‘master texts’ of African postcolonial literature, needed, as the basis of their self-constitution as representative, canonical works, to subsume gender difference under the putatively more primary racial and cultural difference of a resisting Africa from a colonizing Europe” (Jeyifo 848). By this obstruction of gender difference, Okonkwo's mother, his wives and daughters recede into the background which enables the figure of Okonkwo and his father and son to achieve their representational prominence. Nothing reveals this crude, physical androcentricism more than the fact that the gun, the machete, and the cudgel (for wife- beating and child beating), extensions of an aggressive, neurotic masculinist identity, are Okonkwo's ultimate answers to any and all crises, this behaviour is witnessed in several incidents in the novel: the incident of the beating of his second wife during the week of peace and as Jeyifo adds “the episode of the severe beating of his son, Nwoye, when the unhappy youth was spotted among the new community of Christian converts; and the climactic moment of the novel which results in Okonkwo's beheading of the first in the line of the advance party of the hirelings of the

colonial administration who had come to break up the village assembly at the end of the novel” (852).

Towards the end of the text, as against the aggressive masculinity of Okonkwo, there is a feminization of Nwoye which Okonkwo cannot quite bear or understand. Nwoye is lured by the gentleness of the foreign religion. This important distance between father and son is eloquently but succinctly captured in the economy of the following short passage:

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine. But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul in the question of twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled (Achebe 103).

6. Conclusion

The role of women in *Things Fall Apart* appears to be unfairly limited in terms of their authority and power. Though the women of the clan hold some very powerful positions: spiritually as the priestess and the sacred women, symbolically as the earth goddess, and literally as the nurturers of the Ibo people, the helpers of husbands in farming as well as the caretakers of yam crops, and the mothers and educators of the Ibo children, the text accords them only a fractured representation in an ambiguous manner. The text predominantly stands out as a male conceptual, ideological space of a Nationalist African Ideology. And it is a space which has been considerably echoed in postcolonial African fiction, by Achebe himself in *Anthills of the Savannah*, and by other male writers like Ousmane Sembene, Nuruddin Farah, Femi Osofisan and Ngugiwa Thiong'o. What is required is a reclaiming of the 'women-lore' in African Writing so that these canonical texts serve as little more than westernised representatives of gender.

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