

Things Fall Apart: A Literary Segment of Subjugation and Strength

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Abstract:

This research project tends to unveil binary image of women in Chinualumogo Achebe's debut novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In this novel patriarchal society has been at the forefront. In this androcentric milieu men enjoy privileged position. They are highly possessed with the pseudo feeling of the sovereignty of their gender which have been passed to them from their generations. Women are not credited for their contributions despite the fact that many things are unthinkable without them. They are merely viewed as the nurturers of their children and the supporters of their husbands in farming. Irrespective of their strenuous efforts they are relegated to secondary position. Men are not compassionate and try to display their supremacy over women through violent acts. Being proud of their authority and power, men as ringmasters tackle their women beastly. Women do not break their silence against the adverse conditions but embrace them as a curse of their destiny. Without regard to the fact how Achebe sets forth the picture of patriarchal society on the flip side, he too draws the portrait of some potent women who dominate men.

Keywords: Gender, Phallogentric, Androcentric, Subjugation, Performativity.

In the African cultural scenario polygamy is often practised. A man having more than one wife is considered highly influential and powerful in the Igbo society. But the position of a woman is merely relegated to an object to be brought home after marriage and to conceive male child for her family. So, conventionally women are trapped in stringent social bonds and struggle throughout their lives but they never think of springing out of those vicious boundaries chalked out by the phallogentric social structure. Their life is nothing more than emulation of roles imposed upon them by the society.

Judith Butler's notion of performativity can be regarded as a cornerstone for profound analysis of the novel. In her path breaking book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the*

Subversion of Identity (1990) Butler cites that gender is a performance. She sets out to argue that gender is basically a social construction and has nothing to do with biological sex. The roots of gender performance grow up on the basis of our daily practices and activities. Gender definitions are not stiff but bound to vary according to time and culture. Butler in her esteemed essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” mentions, “... gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously instituted in time-an identity through a stylized repetition of acts” (519).

Gender is usually determined by the acts we perform and not something we are born with. It is a matter of fact that gender becomes so naturalized in our psyche that it appears to us as a reality rather than a fabricated historical production. In Butler’s words, “My suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). She even claims, “...gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (520). Judith Butler emphasises, “Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy” (531).

Butler’s views are in corollary to Simone de Beauvoir, who, in her legendary book *The Second Sex* (1949) also mentions, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (295). She implies that a woman is not born a woman but this epithet is framed in her mental make-up by the society. Feminists identify women not as biologically produced but as embodiments of patriarchy. Gender identity is generally not inherent but gradually acquired. After taking birth, a child grows up while embracing specific set of attitudes, rights and duties associated with his/her sex, this is how gender is formed. Beauvoir asserts in the same book:

As a matter of fact, the privileged position of man comes from the integration of his biologically aggressive role with his social function as leader or master; it is on account of this social function that the physiological differences take on all their significance. Because man is ruler in the world, he holds that the violence of his desires is a sign of his sovereignty; a man of great erotic capacity is said to be strong, potent- epithets that imply activity and transcendence. But on the other hand, woman being only an object, she will never manifest other passive qualities. (397)

Things Fall Apart is an iconic emblem of male supremacy and female subjugation. In this patriarchal scenario where men are all in all, women have no leading authority. They

are merely sketched as a downgraded stock of patriarchal institution. Men's power of decision making, authority over women and ability to do difficult jobs show their high-handedness. In this Igbo-Nigerian society the word 'woman' is associated with 'weakness'. As women are viewed as weak and impotent creatures, they are never seen capable of difficult tasks. In 1958 when the novel was published second-wave feminism was around the corner. Joining the second-wave feminism was a long way off; these incognizant women didn't even have a foggy idea of first-wave feminism which was proposed to enfranchise women. They never stepped out of their doorsteps to see the world around them. They often do house chores and easy jobs lacking strength. Their lives are marked by male supremacy.

Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel was a powerful and successful man of the clan and "well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond." Unlike his father Unoka, he was a potent man. His father was a failure in his life as "his wife and children had barely enough to eat". In their clan any state of being weak was starkly assigned with womanliness. Okonkwo was afraid of his father's unwelcomed reputation because his fellows usually looked down upon him as weak as woman. Okonkwo was highly ashamed when he came to know that "agbala was not only another name for woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title" (*TFA* 11) which his father was known for. The target is explicitly aimed at the position of women in society to disclose how they have been dethroned from the chair of dignity to mere weak and beastly creatures.

Okonkwo bent upon to display his toughness for, "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (10). He did not wish to resemble his father who lacked manliness. As fear causeth a man to cast beyond the moon, so was the case with Okonkwo. His father's unmanly attributes bring an eternal change within him. His internal panic to escape from being labelled as effeminate was strong enough that he worked hard and beat the great wrestler Amalinze the cat, after a long battle in order to maintain his manliness. The chapter one describes Okonkwo's courageous deed, "As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (3). His father's womanish attitude imprints a long-lasting impression on his mind that he made a firm decision never to look back and go ahead in his life as a successful personality.

Gender roles are fixed by the culture. The conventionally set roles are allotted to each sex by the society. These roles are stereotypes, typically inscribed on the walls of their (both sexes) brain that they are unable to think out of those rules. It is believed that men are

entrusted with supreme authority daring enough to do venturesome jobs. Alike, in the Igbo-Nigerian culture a man having won more and more titles was considered highly influential. Keeping in mind such thoughts, Okonkwo demonstrates all his strength and won significantly honorific titles of his clan on the behalf of his unexplored power.

In the culturally imbalanced societies men's glory is measured in terms of the titles they earned and the power of muscles. Polygamy adds a feather in their cap since marrying more than one wife is regarded as a symbol of their prestige and success. It is mentioned in the novel that Okoye, who is Okonkwo's neighbour "had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives" (*TFA* 5). Okonkwo too has three wives and there is a man called Nwakibie who has 'nine wives and thirty children'. No woman is bold enough to challenge this structure that devoids them of their subjectivity.

The practice of fixing bride-price before marriages too was prevalent in that customary society. Achebe seems to echo the French feminist Luce Irigaray who in *This Sex Which Is Not One* elaborates on the practice of exchange of women as commodities. In the text, there is a thorough account of this practice as Obierika and his friends were fixing bride-price with Akueke's suitors:

Obierika then presented to him a small bundle of short broomsticks. Ukegbu counted them. "They are thirty?" he asked....The three rose and went outside. When they returned Ukegbu handed the bundle of sticks back to Obierika. He counted the; instead of thirty there were now only fifteen. He passed them over to his eldest brother, Machi, who also counted them and said: "We had not thought to go below thirty. But as the dog said, 'If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play'. Marriage should be a play and not a fight so we are falling down again." (53)

By and by both the parties agreed at twenty bags of cowries as Akueke's bride-price. After this deal there was long conversation over the custom of fixing bride-price in other clans. Obierika's remarks about the ways followed by the other villages as, "All their customs are upside-down. They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or a cow in the market" (53) and Obierika's elder brother's words that "In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop" (53). This event demonstrates a deep-rooted influence of this conventional practice.

After marriage, keeping women under their control was their prime business. In the novel it was believed, “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” (38). This instance is fairly sufficient to provide us a chance to peep into the mean minds of the people of clan.

For centuries women have been the worst sufferers of men’s subjugation. According to *Cambridge Dictionary* the word ‘subjugate’ means, “to defeat people or a country and rule them in a way that allows them no freedom”. As women are not conscious of their rights, they are invisibly chained by men. They are mere dummies who can be placed anywhere. Women are merely slaves of their masters (men) for they are never sought for their consent in important matters instead they agree with the decisions made by men. Men have sufficient rights to curb the activities of women which is enough to exhibit a sensible authority of men. Women have internalized this exploitation and accepted it as a part of their life. They are failed to imagine that they too can ever spread their wings and fly in the sky. Seeing women’s tendency to view themselves as dependent beings Beauvoir remarks, “But the girl, since childhood and whether she intends to stay within or go beyond the bounds of femininity, has looked to the male for fulfilment and escape... she thinks that under his caresses she will feel herself borne along by the vast current of life.....” (352). Beauvoir implies that women always view men as their saviours. They have a general mentality that during tough times only men can provide them shelter under their umbrella. So, the continuity of this fact through generations has now become the truth of their lives.

There are times when the Igbo women are violently beaten by their husbands as men are well aware of the fact that their women will never react back. As Okonkwo was a well-reputed man in his society, he had three wives and children under his command. Having no respect for womanhood, he easily vents his anger upon them. Okonkwo’s wives “especially the youngest, lived in a perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children” (10). His anger took a terrible form during the ‘Week of Peace’, a sacred week, which was usually observed by the community people to maintain peace in the honour of their Earth Goddess which will turn as a blessing for their crops. On this sacred day Ojiugo (Okonkwo’s third wife) went to her friend’s house to plait her hair. Meanwhile Okonkwo came to her obi. After seeing that the fireplace was cold and she was not there he bit his lips in fury and went back to his obi. When she returned home, in a fit of anger he gave her a sound beating. He had “forgotten that it was the week of peace.”

When Ikemefuna brought to Umuofia by Okonkwo to avoid war and bloodshed, he called Nwoye's mother to hand over Ikemefuna to her and said, "he belongs to the clan...so look after him" (12). At that point she instinctively asked, "Is he staying long with us?" (12) Okonkwo's anger crossed all the boundaries and he shouted, "Do what you are told, woman" (12) and roared "When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?" (12). Through this Achebe sets out to demonstrate that women have no right to ask questions or argue but to follow the orders of men.

The only time of enjoyment for women was the festivals. Women and children were much enthusiastic for they were busy in drawing patterns on the walls to celebrate The New Yam Festival. During these days children too wore beautiful attires and shave them well. But Okonkwo was reluctant person as he had loathing in his heart for this festival. He never liked to while away his time in such occasions. It was the festival of joy but for him it was the festival of laziness so he was trying to restrain his anger. Suddenly, his suppressed anger explodes and he began to complain about a banana tree. He asked, "Who killed this banana tree?" (28) When nobody answered he reiterated, "Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb?" (28) The chapter four of the novel gives a brief account of his rough and barbarous reaction for female characters. It is mentioned, "Okonkwo's second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping" (28). Silence is something which causes much of our troubles. Arundhati Roy states, "There's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard." A woman's strength is in her tongue. They are not permissible to discharge their sentiments and mourn the injustice they experience but their voice is crushed. In the novel, if Okonkwo's second wife tried to prevent herself from her husband's wild attack, then the situation might not be the same.

Okonkwo planned to go for hunting just to pass his time with his rusty old gun though he was not a hunter. As he was a highly respectable man, any challenge to his masculinity was unbearable for him. There is a serious account of his deadly encounter with his wife:

In fact he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her Okonkwo 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 wives and children. (29)

The above scene is plentiful to satisfy our queries about the nature of men in the African patriarchal society. It demonstrates that a woman who never spoke in front of Okonkwo suddenly started speaking, albeit slowly, was intolerant for him. It can be presumed that women themselves are responsible for this mistreatment.

Women are always deprived of the place of honour. During the wrestling match women were not allowed to sit on the chairs to watch the match. Only elders and “grandees of the village sat on their own stools brought there by their young sons or slaves” (34). When the people of the clan were gathered to settle a dispute, Achebe observes “it was 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. The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin” (TFA 64). Special women were chosen to paint the walls of egwugwu house “under the supervision of men.” They were banned to see inside the house. Imagination was the only thing that helped them to figure out what was in the hut.

The case of Uzowulu and Mgbafo presents the meanness of male- dominant society. Mgbafo’s brothers took their sister to their village because of Uzowulu’s ill-treatment. In the meeting Mgbafo’s brother Odukwe presented his argument:

My in-law, Uzowulu, is a beast. My sister lived with him for nine years. During those years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman. We have tried to settle their quarrels time without number and on each occasion Uzowulu was guilty. (67)

Though Uzowulu cried many times, nobody paid heed to his pleads. Odukwe said, “When she was pregnant, he beat her until she miscarried” (67). Odukwe’s speech before egwugwu, depicting the miserable circumstances of his sister, sends a shudder through the spine. He continued:

Last year when my sister was recovering from an illness, he beat her again so that if the neighbours had not gone in to save her she would have been killed. We heard of it, and did as you have been told. The law of Umuofia is that is a woman runs away from

her husband her bride-price is returned. But in this case she ran away to save her life.
(67)

So, domestic violence, a harsh reality was prevalent not only in Okonkwo's family but throughout the Nigerian society.

Okonkwo had severe loathing for the word 'woman' which was explicit when he, along with his fellow men was going for the execution of Ikemefuna. At that critical moment some of them withdrew from this disheartening task and tagged 'effeminate men'. When it came to Okonkwo, he too listened to the call of his pleading conscience but at once chides himself, "When did you become a shivering old woman?" (47) Achebe, by adding an adjective 'shivering' with the identity of women proves the miserable plight of women in the light of men who consider them as meek, sheepish and dependent fellows. Even Okonkwo had strong loathing for Egonwanne for his womanish traits. He considered him 'the great obstacle in Umoufia' whose 'sweet tongue can change fire into cold ash'. Indrasena Reddy in his book *The Novels of Achebe and Ngugi: A Study in the Dialectics of Commitment* analysis, "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" (31).

Achebe placed his novel on a high pedestal by taking it to the heights of gender imbalance. Though Ezinma was Okonkwo's lovable daughter but he always wished, "She should have been a boy" (47). He yelled at her to "sit like a woman!" so she "brought her two legs together and stretched them in front of her" (33). When she urged her father to bring a chair for him, he screamed "No, that is a boy's job" (33). It is a better example to represent the negligence of a girl child in pre-colonial Igbo-Nigerian society.

Just as we keep gardener for the maintenance and protection of a garden, so are the women in the Igbo society who are merely valued as the caretakers of the fields and children. The first and foremost duty of a woman is to give birth to a child. She is restricted to reproduction incapable of any rational activity. In the conventional society of Africa giving birth to a child was acknowledged as "woman's crowning glory" but it was merely a physical trauma for Ekwefi. She was supposed to be a cursed woman who was incapable to give birth to a living child. She had suffered a lot in her life since, "She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy, usually before the age of three" (56). At last, Ezinma was the only girl child of Ekwefi who survived. Simultaneously, there was a woman, Okonkwo's first

wife, who had the capacity to conceive more and more children, especially boys. Contrasting the feelings of both the mothers Achebe writes:

When she had borne her third son in succession, Okonkwo had slaughtered a goat for her, as was the custom. Ekwefi had nothing but good wishes for her...And so, on the day that Nwoye's mother celebrated the birth of her three sons with feasting and music, Ekwefi was the only person in the happy company who went about with a cloud on her brow. (58)

The society looks down upon a woman unable to give birth to a son but is not concerned about the secret psychic agony she undergoes in the harsh domineering culture. John Stuart Mill in his essay "The Subjection of Women" points out, "The general opinion of men is supposed to be that a woman's natural vocation is that of a wife and mother" (32). Due to this idea the fear of abandonment is always lurking in a woman's mind that she will be neglected by her family and society. All through her life she acts as a puppet whose strings are always in the hands of men. Women were active participants in agricultural activities. Alike them crops too were biased. Achebe's novel reflects how Okonkwo's "mother and sister worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava" (18). Contrary to this "Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop" (18). Ultimately, from aleph to zenith the society was divided on the basis of gender binaries.

Okonkwo had a deep longing for Nwoye to be brave with full capacity of manliness but Nwoye was no longer interested in 'masculine tasks'. To make his father happy he "would feign annoyance and grumble aloud about women and their troubles" (TFA 38). Okonkwo got satisfied at Nwoye's disliking for womanhood. He "encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell..." (39).

Okonkwo's behaviour presents the stereotypes of his society. Although Nwoye lacks interest in manly jobs yet at the same time he cannot ignore the demands of the society. Okonkwo arranged a kind of training to teach boys how to overpower women with heavy hand. This is how gender roles are forcibly fixed in the minds of human beings which continue with them throughout their life.

Men vehemently deny the power of women still they are the strongest sex of the society. Known as “Roaring Flame” Okonkwo was thoroughly deaf to the worries of his women but could not dare to ignore the threat of the priestess Chielo. She was a widow with two children in her casual life. Following the orders of Agbala who wanted to meet Ezinma, she came to Okonkwo’s obi to bring her.

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. Her voice was as clear as metal, and Okonkwo’s women and children heard from their huts all that she said. Okonkwo was still pleading that the girl had been ill of late and was asleep. (74)

In lieu of heeding Okonkwo’s pleas, she vigorously bellowed, “Beware, Okonkwo!” She threatened “Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a God speaks? Beware!” (*TFA* 74). The situation turned turtle after listening to the sharp words of the priestess. Okonkwo, the stout-hearted man was left stunned. He could not muster the courage to argue further.

Okonkwo was badly scolded by Ezeani, the priest of earth goddess Ani, when he broke the rule of ‘Week of Peace’ by beating his wife. At the call of Ezeani, Okonkwo brought kola nuts for her but in a fury, she said, “Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors” (23). She admonished, “The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (23). At that moment Okonkwo was at loss. He was speechless before a woman. No such instance is found in the novel where Okonkwo paid reverence to a woman.

Ekwefi equally was a strong woman who didn’t let the pain of her nine dead children weigh heavy upon her but spent the precious time with her only daughter Ezinma. She had the potential to do anything for her daughter. She came with barrage of questions when Chielo was asking for Ezinma. She asked her straightforwardly, “Where does Agbala want to see her?” (74) She was ready to go with the priestess. She made up a mind and chased her daughter throughout the night. Okonkwo asked her where she was going, she replied, “I am following Chielo” (75). Her deep concern for her daughter is apparent as she was continuously tracking Chielo’s way in the dark. When the priestess suspected that someone was following her, she cursed, “Whether you are spirit or man, may Agbala shave your head

with a blunt razor! May he twist your neck until you see your heels!” (77). Ekwefi stopped for a while but resumed soon. Despite the obstacles, she did her best to save her daughter. Her recklessness towards the threats of Chielo sheds light on the forceful side of her character. Thus, in an emphatic way Achebe represents the courageous act and strong determination of Ekwefi.

Ezinma and Ekwefi enjoyed lovable relationship of mother and daughter. She fed her daughter eggs which the children were not permissible to eat “because such food tempted them to steal.” After Okonkwo’s warning Ezinma’s appetite for eggs grew. To fulfil her daughter’s will Ekwefi secretly gave her eggs to eat in their bedroom. It is evident that she was not a meek woman but as an unconventional woman diverges from the path of an ordinary woman and looks for the wishes of her daughter against her husband’s opinion.

Women are at the margins while men occupy central position in our society. They have a prejudice in their mind that women cannot survive alone in this world. But the will power of a woman is beyond their imagination, as is writ large in Ekwefi’s case. Chielo and Ezeani’s fuming aura could make anyone feel frightened from them. If anyone risks defying their sacred rules, he was severely punished. Just the reverse Achebe exposes women who scare from men’s power and consider themselves as their servants. They are subjected to the idiosyncrasies of their commanders by virtue of societal notions that women are incapable in both physical and mental structure than men. It is to say that women cannot progress until they throw out these mean ideas from their mental structure. The study of this novel challenges the phallic dominance which is reserved only for men. The woman priestess is as phallic as men. The arbitrariness of gender hierarchies is imposed so as to initiate change in the social order.

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