

Women in Achebe's Novel "Things Fall Apart"

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Abstract

This paper explores the image of women in Chinua Achebe novel's *Things Fall Apart*. As the prominent postcolonial writer, Achebe has a vivid expression describing the social cultural values of the Ibo community in Nigeria, Africa. Analysis of the novel is done through the perspective of postcolonial feminism. Postcolonial feminism finds the relation and intersection between Postcolonialism and feminism. This interplay is interesting to observe. The findings show that in traditional patriarchal culture as in the novel, women are portrayed happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barren from any say in the communal 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 he made it an amusement, for example by punishing Okonkwo because of his beating to his wife in the sacred time.

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

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bermaksud untuk menyelami penggambaran wanita dalam novel Chinua Achebe yang berjudul *Things Fall Apart*. Sebagai penulis terkenal sejak era pasca penjajahan, Achebe dapat memberikan gambaran nyata mengenai nilai-nilai sosial budaya dari komunitas Ibo di Nigeria, Afrika. Ketika menganalisis novel ini, penulis menggunakan perspektif feminisme pasca penjajahan. Dalam perspektif tersebut, didapatkan adanya hubungan antara pasca-kolonialisme dengan feminisme yang saling mempengaruhi. Keadaan saling mempengaruhi ini sangat menarik untuk diteliti. Dalam penelitian ini ditemukan bahwa dalam budaya patriarki tradisional seperti yang dilukiskan dalam novel, para wanita digambarkan

dalam keadaan bahagia, dan sebagai anggota komunitas yang harmonis; bahkan ketika mereka berkali-kali dianiaya dan tidak 'dianggap keberadaannya ketika ada proses pembuatan keputusan dalam kelompok, serta secara terus-menerus dicaci-maki dalam bentuk berbagai sindiran dan ungkapan tak langsung. Meskipun begitu, ada hal menarik lain yang ditemukan dalam penelitian ini, dimana para wanita pun juga mempunyai peran yang besar yang tertuang dalam sistem kepercayaan pada komunitas tersebut, contohnya ketika mereka menghukum Okonkwo karena telah memukul istrinya pada waktu yang dikeramatkan.

Kata Kunci: *Feminisme Pasca Penjajahan, Budaya Patriarki Tradisional, Komunitas*

Introduction

Things Fall Apart (1958) is a novel, depicting the life of Okonkwo along with the tradition and culture of a communal Igbo society in Nigeria, Africa at the time of the community's encountering with outside white power. The story is set in the 1890s, when missionaries and colonial government made its intrusion into Igbo society. The main character, Okonkwo, is an ambitious and powerful leader of the community, who places the high importance of physical strength and courage. As the strong and powerful man in a clan, Okonkwo's life is good; he is a hard worker, his compound is large, he has no troubles with his three wives, his garden grows yams, and he is respected by his fellow villagers. However, one day there is an incident in which Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman, so that he is banished from the village for seven years. During the seven years of exile, he thinks that he can be back and gains his power and pride in his village, Umuofa. But his downfall is triggered by his blindness to changes happened to the circumstances; the missionary church, which brings with it the new authority of the British District Commissioner. In this process, Okonkwo is destroyed, because his

unwillingness to change set him apart from the community and he is fighting alone against colonialism. He ends his life tragically.

One of the most interesting aspects of Achebe's novel is its cultural richness of Ibo community in Nigeria, Africa, presented in simple English language but full of beautiful expression. The author, Chinua Achebe, has his own way of writing. It seems that he wants to show that his culture is noble and dignified, of which he counters many white people's perception towards black people. Born as a Nigerian and educated in his homeland and continued to England, emphasized his character as an African. His English is good and he made it such a way that his English is able to present the thought and feeling of the Nigerian indigenous people. He has his own way to claim that the black people is civilized and noble.

That is why Achebe was furious to the description of black people in the novels of Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that portrayed the black people as undignified, stupid, slavishly adores his white colonies boss. He wanted to fight back the 'stereotyping' through the writing of this novel.

The spirit to fight against the black stereotyping made by white writers marks Chinua Achebe's works; novels and poems, and at the beginning it can be found out in this novel, *Things Fall Apart*. This novel is authentic, in the sense that it is written by Nigerian writer and is discussing about their own culture. Under the spirit of dignity, the writer portrays the black people and their culture in sympathetic way. However, the culture itself is portrayed as something that is not stagnant. It is dynamic and possibly changes from time to time and from places to other places. The dynamic covers many aspects of culture, including the way people and tradition treat women in such a patriarchal community.

The social and cultural condition of the people of such patriarchal community at a certain period of time is reflected in this novel in such a way that we will get an idea that this is the real condition of community, in which man is the patriarch and woman is the subordinates. In this novel, however, Achebe presents the cultural complexity and dynamic of the society, in Africa at the end of 19th Century. The reader will be presented with the Ibo traditional culture, including how they treat the women, and its values all of which are worthy in building the perception on the culture. The novel provides many customs, ceremonies, and their belief system that involve all of the members of the community, men and women, child and adult. For example, we will find many rites such as funeral ceremony, wedding ceremony, baby initiation and other rites held because of a certain cause that is closely related to their belief system. This culture is a complex one and it also develops and changes.

In many cultures of different societies, women are colonized subjects and have been relegated to the position of 'other'. As mentioned above, this novel describes the culture of Ibo society in sympathetic way. However, there is still a question, how it treats the women. For that reason, it is interesting to explore the image of women in this novel, the existing socio-cultural situation, and the factors conditioning the male's attitudes toward women.

Postcolonial feminism

Postcolonial literature refers to a body of literature written by authors with roots in countries that were once colonies established by European nations. Postcolonial literature includes works by authors with cultural roots in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, and other places in which colonial independence movement arose and colonized people achieved autonomy in the past hundred years (Murfin,2006: 496). In this notion, Achebe is one of

the most outstanding postcolonial writers. Chinua Achebe is the first African writer who had the acclaimed The Man Booker International Prize in 2007 for his first novel *Things Fall Apart*. The Achebe's novels mostly tell about the African community, its cultural and custom richness. Many ceremonies, traditional festivals and customs are presented in English language that is rich with proverbs, metaphors, legends, myths, and taboos. This is not surprising because Achebe as the pioneer of the modern African writing has a great desire to, as Kirsten said, show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage (in Ashcroft, 1995:237).

Achebe's mission through his works is in line with what Ketu H. Katrak (in Ashcroft, 1996) stated that social responsibility must be the basis of any theorizing on postcolonial literature as well as the root of the creative work of the writers themselves. Achebe completely realized that the colonized countries got destroyed culturally, socially and politically. This is what he spoke aloud in his works. African cultural values are systematically denigrated by colonialist ideologist and institutions demand positive representation, and this restitutive impulse has frequently been seen to conflict with feminist reformation.

In the further movement of decolonizing, it is important then to see the roles of women. Most of the society in Africa is patriarchal. They give more importance and roles on the male much more than the female. It is important, then to talk about the notion of 'double colonization'. Double colonization is coined by Ketu Katrak, referring to the notion that women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies – became a catch-phrase of postcolonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s (in Ashcroft, 1996:240). This condition leads to the more complex

struggle and movement of women. In many cases the imperial colonization comes first to be fought against, and unfortunately ignored the other. Under such condition, there are some Black African women writers that fight against the double colonization. However, most of the men African writers, especially Achebe, ignored the women issue in the course of fighting the colonialism and cultural imperialism. This is because any aspects of life, including the women, are focused on the issue of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence.

Kirsten Holst Petersen stated that Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this (the women issues) light. (in Ashcroft, 1995:237). Women in Achebe reflect the social condition of the society of 1890s. In the traditional culture, women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barren from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom behaving like woman is to behave like an inferior being. Therefore, this is interesting to find further, how Achebe portrays the women in his novels. Does he ignore women issues in his novel? In what way he presents the women?

Women in *Things Fall Apart*

This novel tells the story of a strong man in Umuofia, a small village of Ibo society, in 1900s, named Okonkwo. He is a hard worker, a great warrior and successfully gets prosperous life. Although he inherited no barn nor title, he was able to make it by himself. With the setting of agrarian patriarchal society of Igbo (or Ibo), this man, Okonkwo set his mind to keep his pride and value against his surrounding world.

In *Things Fall Apart*, patriarchy intrudes into any sphere of life. What we can read from the beginning of this novel is the world that centers on male. The man is everything and the woman is nothing. Woman is the man's possession, as wives and other possession like yam barns, and title. Men who have all these possession will be respected and get the highest title in the clan.

There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan. (18)

Domestically, women belong to the man. The man will do anything to keep his prestige and dignity as the head of the family.

To maintain the patriarchal society, men create the educational system in which the next generation is thought what to do and how to behave as what the father wanted. This educational system will maintain the values of the tradition. In doing this educational function, Okonkwo is highly aware of the male and female jobs and knowledge. When Ezinma, his daughter of his second wife, asked him to bring his chair for him, he replied that this is boy's job. Although, Ezinma was strong and smart enough to do the job.

'Yes,' and after a pause she said: 'Can I bring your chair for you?'

'No, that's a boy's job.' (42)

In Okonkwo's mind, men must be strong, violent, and hard worker. He wanted these characteristics belong to his sons. That a man must be able to control women is kept in his mind.

He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his womenfolk. 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 a really a man. (49-50)

For that reason, it is good in his opinion that man has to do anything, even violent one to ensure his own power. Okonkwo beat and shot his wife, Ekwefi only for small things.

Okonkwo 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. (37)

And so when he called Ikefemuna 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 the as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. (37)

To ensure that the sons obey him and value the tradition as Okonkwo did, he was proud of telling the stories to his sons about his wars, violence and bloodshed. He was determined that this custom must be preserved and valued. This kind of stories differs from female stories that tell much about fable, animal stories or legend.

He told them the stories of the land, masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoyne 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, stories of tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. (50)

Not only different but male stories are more respected than mother's stories. The woman's stories only refer to the foolish women and children. This male-centered society is highly patriarchal.

He now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man.So Nwoyer and Ikefemuna would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim overpowered him and obtained his first human head. (51)

In this novel, the agrarian people make a living by growing yam. The yam — is synonymous with virility. This prestigious plant brings with it the owner's respect and dignity. That is why the yam stands for manliness, the plant for men.

Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed . . .
. . . Yam, the king of crops, is a very exacting king (31-32)

Consequently, to produce an abundant harvest, the traditional farmer needs a good workforce. Women constitute and still do the core of the rural workforce — farming, tending animals, nurturing children. In preparing for festival, all of the women will be very busy preparing the abundant foods for all of the villages and their relatives from outside of village. In any kind of ceremony, women work hard with many activities.

women [are] to be seen not heard, coming and going, with mounds of foofoo, pots of water, market baskets, fetching kola, being scolded and beaten before they disappear behind the huts of their compound (34)

In this novel, as the mirror of the society at that time, Okonkwo, chauvinistically believes that women's place is in the home (41), although in fact many economic activities are held by the women, at public sphere.

The social structure of this Ibo community can be seen from the way the people stand or sit in the ceremony. The titled men and elders (the most respected men) sit on their special seat called stool. The crowd, people watching the ceremony, stands a bit distant. On the other side, the women just look on from the fringe. They are not involved in the meeting, not even as audience. The women are like the outsiders.

“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” (83)

For centuries, African women languished on the fringe of their universe — neglected, exploited, degenerated, and indeed made to feel like outsiders. They were not invited to stay when men were engaged in any discussion. They were not included in councils of war, because war is man’s job in patriarchal society. They did not form part of the masquerades representing the judiciary and ancestral spirits.

Because women are socially construed as the unimportant, anything having connotation with bad things or bad characteristic will refer to the femininity. Okonkwo’s father, Unuoika was a weak and poor man. He had no titles, no enough food for his family and had much debt. When he consulted his fate to Agbala, the priestess who has power from her god, he got the answer to do hard working like a man.

“You, Unuoika, are known in all the clan for the weaknesses of your machet and your hoe. ...they cross seven rivers to make their farms, you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man.(17)

When a man is not powerful enough, not respected, he is not considered as a man. This happens to Unuoika, Okonkwo’s father. The coco-yam with smaller size and consequently has lesser value than other yams, is regarded as female.

Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, is considered an untitled man, connoting femininity (20).

Coco-yam, of smaller size and lesser value than other yams, is regarded as female.

Osugo has taken no title; and so, in a gathering of his peers, Okonkwo unkindly tells him, “This meeting is for men” (28).

This novel also tells about the incident in which Okonkwo felt guilty

because of killing Ikemefuna. He felt guilty, although according to their rule Ikemefuna has to be killed, but it should not be done with his own. On the other hand, he in fact loves this boy. He did it spontaneously, he was afraid of being told weak. Guilt-ridden after murdering Ikemefuna, his surrogate son, Okonkwo sternly reprimands himself not to “become like a shivering old woman” (60) So, Okonkwo never tolerated the ‘feminine trait’ in himself.

When Okonkwo was punished because of accidentally killed a boy of his clan, he must go out of the village, along with all of his family. This he considers the worst insult. Fleeing after the murder, Okonkwo has no other refuge than his mother’s town, which, of course, has to be called Mbanta — “small town” — as being opposed in Okonkwo’s thinking to the rugged, wild, violent, strong, masculine connotations of his Umuofia (meaning “children of the forest”). Such excessive emphases on virility, sex-role stereotyping, gender discrimination, and violence create an imbalance, a resultant denigration of the female principle.

According to Mezu, *Things Fall Apart* is redolent of violent conflicts occasioned by the utter lack of a moderating female influence. One example, of this absence can be found in Achebe’s employment of the folktale narrating the conflict between Earth, representing fertility or the female principle, and Sky, representing the male principle. Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan argue that “the [folktale s] initial quarrel between Earth and Sky represents the struggle between masculine and female powers and principles” (127). Okonkwo, who occasionally but reluctantly yields his tender emotions most often expressed perversely towards Ikemefuna and Nwoye, is a paradigm for sky who withholds rain but releases it reluctantly and perversely, since rain falls as it has never fallen before, preventing vulture, who represents the female principle, from returning to deliver his message, just as Nwoye, with

his effeminate nature, does not return to Okonkwo's compound. (20-21)

The only woman respected in Umuofia is Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, who is removed from the pale of normalcy. Clothed in the mystic mantle of the divinity she serves, Chielo transforms from the ordinary. She can reprimand Okonkwo and even scream curses at him: "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala (the name of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves). Does a man speak when a God speaks? Beware!" (95). Yet if Okonkwo is powerless before a goddess's priestess, he can, at least, control his own women. So, when Nwoye's mother asks if Ikemefuna will be staying long with them, Okonkwo bellows to her: "Do what you are told woman. When did you become one of the ndichie (clan elders)?" (18).

In the last part of this novel, Okonkwo's consequent despair and fall represent the despair and break-up of the Igbo clan before the invincible forces of the white man's religions and political organizations. All of the events under patriarchal community, with the absence of that female principle that could have maintained balance and sanity lead to the downfall of the community. As in the following part of the novel:

It is 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 fatherland 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. (124)

When this community got sorrow and bitterness, they can not find the refuge to their 'mother', because the mother – the representation of all women – is not empowered, so that she can not be a place for refugee.

Conclusion

This novel shows that women in patriarchal traditional community are the 'other'. Women are the men's possession, domestically and politically. Although women have big roles in many social activities, the political decision is on the male's hands. Women do not have position in public place. However, Achebe portrayed the women as happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barren from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs.

Some other interesting finding is that the only place women get respect is in their belief system. Women have big role in the belief system of the community, by having a priestess that has unchallenged authority, even by a powerful man. In Achebe's novel he made it an amusement, for example by punishing Okonkwo because of his beating to his wife in the sacred time.

In their belief system, the most important god is the Ani goddess, the biggest and most influenced one, because it relates to the fertility and welfare. The god and goddess has messenger. The messenger who is mentioned many times in this novel is Chielo, the priestess, the one that is honored by people because she is the 'messenger' of the god. People are afraid of her and obey whatever she says.

This social construction is rooted in the patriarchal culture that gives priority that men are the authority and women are their belonging. In such culture all aspects of life centered on men. Anything positive, good, and strong deals with men while the opposite one deals with female. This condition reduces the roles of women in the real life and leads the leader of this community into his destruction.

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