**Literature Review: Things Fall Apart**

**Abstract:**

In this research, an attempt is made to give a feminist interpretation of Achebe's **Things Fall Apart**. The paper demonstrates that Achebe is inclined to articulating and defending the interest of women in an otherwise patriarchal society despite the contrary views of some critics. The paper concludes that the traditional African society as represented by Umuofia respects the female gender and its roles in society. It goes further to state that Achebe's feminism is womanist, nonsexist, and balanced, which aligns with the dialectical configuration of the patriarchal and matricentric units of the society being portrayed.

**Introduction:**

**Background And Context**

Chinua Achebe reveals a society dignified in its pace, individualistic, communal, aggressive, and accommodating. Achebe's fiction is full of re-discovery and assertion. He delves into Igbo culture and traditions, explores Igbo history, and creates a new image for the Igbo, an image that recognizes the follies of the past, but rejects unqualified condemnation of the past, like the future, with all its realities and illusions, is confronted (Emenyonu, 1987, p.189)

Achebe's Things Fall Apart…. portrays the traditional life of the Ibos (sic) as it came into contact with Western civilization. He describes a well-ordered society where everybody had his duties, responsibilities, and privileges. Justice was done to all, great or small, and even a strong and powerful member of the community like Okonkwo was seriously punished for defying the tribal customs. As soon as such a well-organized society came into contact with the Western world, as brought by Christian missionaries, with all its disruptive influences the old order broke down and became disorganized (Taiwo, 1985, p.51)

As can be seen from the above quotes of two leading outstanding African literary critics and culture purveyors, Achebe attempted to capture the Igbo society in its fullness including its imperfections before the forceful intervention of Western imperialism in Africa in general and Igbo land in particular. For the Igbo the largest and political unit is the community (OBODO, ALA, MBA) which can be briefly described as an agglomeration of lineage groups occupying one territorial area and bound together by a belief in one common ancestor, ALA (the Earth Goddess) and all sanctions appertaining to it. After the nuclear family, the smallest but most important social unit is the kindred-UMUNNA, a group of several nuclear families who have one patrilineal descent. According to Olisa, this social unit is considered the most important because “it is the starting point of the individual’s communal identification among the Igbo” (Olisa, 2002, p.219) Each UMUNNA contains several kindreds and acts independently as a separate unit in a large range of matters. 2001) which demonstrates the presence and visibility of a gendered matricentric structure in the African (Igbo) society represented in the Mkpuke-the female mother-focused matricentric unit. The point being made is that in the traditional Igbo society, the UMUNNA representing maleness and common fatherhood have their specific roles to perform in the society just as the UMUNNE who present the matricentric unit of the society equally perform their own functions. As has been noted by Amadiume, the implications of the MKPUKE structure expose the anthropological distortion of African (Igbo) history and its invention of a European type patriarchy in Africa based on a European paradigmatic theory of patriarchy (Amadiume, 2001, p.19).

**The Cosmological Significance Of Ala To The Igbo**

It is interesting to note that ALA-the Earth is very vital in the lives of the Igbo. Alumona  
has noted that ALA, apart from being the collective conscience of the society is a spatio-temporal entity, which is omnipresent overseeing all actions, private or public (Alumona, 1988). ALA is seen in this light because she is also the source of human subsistence and the ultimate consumer of all the departed, including the good and the bad, the noble and the wretched, the big and the small. Before the shrine of ALA, anyone found guilty of injuring the collective conscience of the society is made to confess and perform some propitiatory rites in order to become accepted in the society. ALA plays a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity as she is the ultimate source of all fertility, judge of morality and conduct.

A kinsman shall never sell a fellow kinsman, nor give false witnesses against him/her, nor abandon him/her in time of trouble, nor commit an incest. Violations of these rules constitute abominations which are believed to be instantly punishable by the ancestors and ALA, unless the necessary rituals of atonement or purification are performed. ALA is one of the most important of a number of deities among the Igbo, the goddess of the Earth and the arbiter of social morality.

**Achebe And The Igbo Worldview**

Any scholar who is abreast of the Igbo traditions and culture will have no problem appreciating the fact that Achebe’s novels especially the ones set during the pre-colonial period  
are realistic reflections of the Igbo personality and society.

Lukács declares that:

Realism is the recognition of the fact that a work of literature can rest neither on a lifeless average, as the naturalists suppose, nor on an individual principle which dissolves its own self into nothingness. The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, nor its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived: what makes a type is that in all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present in their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peak and limits of men and epochs (Lukács, 1964, p.8)

Achebe’s realistic creation of such ‘types’ and typicality of situations clearly shows his concern and social commitment in his depiction of a society in its moments of transition occasioned by rampaging forces of colonialism and imperialism. And as has been argued by Petersen, an important impetus behind the wave of African writing which started in the 1950s was the desire to show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage (Petersen, 2001).  
In looking at Achebe’s works, we must be able to see the Africans, the Igboness and other peculiar experiences of his people as they relate to one another.

**The Attitude Of Achebe Towards Women In Things Fall Apart**

Achebe’s Things Fall Apart which is his attempt to give an interpretation of the history of his people before and after colonial conquest, presents the communication breakdown at two levels between Okonkwo who embodies the strengths and weaknesses of the Umuofia society with his people on the one hand and the Umuofia society itself which collided with Christianity and the British Administration on the other.

The activities of Okonkwo highlight many aspects of social behaviour: among other things, the importance attached to titles in the Igbo society, the duties and responsibilities of an Ozo title holder, the harshness of traditional laws to which everybody is subject, the relationship between husband and wife, the place of the family, women and the community gods, the potency of oracles, the patrilineal nature of Igbo society and such details as the popularity of wrestling as a village sport (Taiwo, 1982). In the paragraphs that follow I will focus my attention on a textual analysis of Things Fall Apart to show that Achebe is a pro-women writer and conclude with some comments on the misreading and misrepresentation of the novel under review. The story of Umuofia is anchored on their warlike prowess, their magical powers, their capacity to win serious and gruesome battles against their enemies. No wonder neigbouring clans who naturally understand the greatness of Umuofia in the comity of clans fear Umuofia to the marrow. As a society that values womanhood and recognises its place in society, an ultimatum is immediately given to the people of Mbaino asking them “to choose between war on the one hand, and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as a compensation” (Achebe, 2002, p.8). As can be noticed in this incident the Umuofia society is ready to go to war on account of one of its daughters killed by Mbaino. In the end, the war is avoided owing to the fact that a young man and a virgin are presented to the Umuofia war emissaries. The fifteen year old lad, Ikemefuna is kept in Okonkwo’s house for the clan while the virgin is given to Ogbuefi Udo as a replacement for his murdered wife. As indicated above, the Umuofia society is feared, respected and revered. Umuofia cannot go to war unless their dreaded Agadi nwayi asks them to do so, “because their dreaded Agadi-nwayi would never fight what the Ibo call a fight of blame” (TFA9).

We are told in the novel that people come from far  
and near to consult it:

They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their  
departed fathers (Achebe, 2002, p.12).

The way into the shine is a round hole at the side of a hill. In the words of Owomoyela,

“Achebe’s portrayal of women in his earlier  
novel is quite sensitive, and that it accurately depicts

the regard Umuofia has for women, despite instances

of abuse of women by men, which are in any

case never applauded or condoned” (Owomoyela, 2002, p.7).

Okonkwo commits a taboo (Nso Ala or Ani) by beating his wife during the week of peace and is made to atone for it. In fact, according to the Ezeani, the priest of the Earth goddess, Okonkwo is punished for committing two crimes:

1. the beating of his wife which is frowned upon by the society
2. it is also an offence against the earth goddess who as earlier pointed out is the ultimate source of life.

In the encounter between Okonkwo and Obierika after the killing of Ikemefuna, the greatness and power of the goddess come to the fore. According to Obierika: “What you have done will not please the Earth. Okonkwo in his younger days had gone to Nwakibie’s house (for Nwakibie was a wealthy man) to beg for yam seedlings. The grace and reverence with which Nwakibie’s wives were called in and served the drinks show clearly the level of respect and acceptance accorded women in the novel. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the women folk in a large and prosperous family. The traditional wisdom of women in the society of the novel when it comes to activities like marriage, important funeral rites, coronations and other events cannot be wished away. They take time off to teach some moral lessons into the lives of their children by telling them folktales at nights. Another woman of substance who is also revered in the novel is Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. The encounter between Okonkwo and Chielo in Okonkwo’s compound is very instructive. She carries Ezinma away in the dead of the night warning Okonkwo, “Beware, Okonkwo”. Okonkwo is banished to Mbanta, his mother’s land because the crime he committed is against the earth goddess by inadvertently killing a clansman. For Okonkwo, the crime and the subsequent humiliation reduce him to the status of a pauper. We note with emphasis that but for his mother’s place Okonkwo had lost all hope of survival and reintegration. It is also in recognition of the place and value of motherhood that Okonkwo names his first child born him in exile, Nneka.

As Uchendu, Okonkwo’s maternal uncle informs his children and Okonkwo after the latter and family have come to live with him in Mbanta, when there is sorrow and bitterness, a man finds refuge in his motherland: It’s true that a child belongs to its father. There is something in women that radiates power and influence, which may not be noticed by people easily. With the way Okonkwo carries on and looks down on people he feels superior to, describing them as effeminate, no one would have thought that his saving grace lies with womanhood. There is no doubting the fact that Okonkwo is harsh to his wives but that may not be said of every other male character in the novel. Okonkwo has his co-travellers in the ignoble act of wife beating. There is a strong rejection of this type of attitude as can be seen in the gallant display of Mgbafo’s brothers who are ready to deal with Uzoulu for his beastly attitude towards their sister, a cherished woman. The defence put up by the Odukwe family to protect their sister and daughter indicates the place and position of Mgbafo in their hearts in particular and the place and position of women in the society being portrayed in general. Expectedly, Uzowulu is found guilty by the judges as represented by the egwugwu numbering nine. Uzowulu will need to beg to get his wife back and having done that, it is our view that he has become a changed person who has seen the need to respect his wife and womanhood in general. From the foregoing textual analysis of Achebe’s Things Fall Apart in regard to the place and position of women, it is apposite to insist that women are not presented as trite images. Women are extremely important in the scheme of things even in spite of the deviant and unacceptable attitudes of the like of Okonkwo and Uzowulu. In the novel, we see women performing their roles as artist(es). During wrestling matches and other festival activities, they provide songs of praise and act as a reservoir of the people’s lores and wisdom. The songs of praise the women heap on the contestants at the village square during festivals are designed to serve as psychological stimulant or tune-up.

What would have been of Nwoye and Ikemefuna without Nwoye’s mother?

These amazons include but not limited to the following:

Agadi Nwayi, Chielo, Mgbafo, Ozoemena, Anasi, Ekwefi (who we are told had ten children and portrayed as a strong woman), Ezinma etc. The women, apart from farming and taking care of the home front go to the bush to collect firewood and other things needed in their homes.

**Conclusion:**

In traditional African society like Umuofia, the female sex is respected and its roles highly esteemed. Contrary to many unfounded assumptions, Achebe does not see them as a nonentity. In marriage, a man is made to pay substantially as a way of showing the value of what he seeks after. It is in that context that we can appreciate the marriage between Ibe and Akweke.

Women are treated as Amazons of culture and tradition. They are perceptive and competent thereby complementing the efforts of men in the society; a mandatory element for collective survival. Achebe does not portray women in a patronizing manner but clearly depicts the reality of the African society which recognizes the patriarchal and matricentric units of the society. Any one who understands the Igbo philosophy and the nuances of Things Fall Apart will realise that Achebe demonstrates convincingly that women are considered very important in the affairs of the society he portrays in spite of the patriarchal subjection of women by the like of Okonkwo.

Achebe’s feminism is womanist, nonsexist and balanced. Both sexes are important to each other and for the survival of the society. Roles are assigned to each other in such a manner that allows for mutual respect and understanding. This is in accordance with the nature of his society. It is therefore a misreading of Achebe for critics like Peterson to think that the novelist is “quite contented” with the inequality of the sexes.

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