



## Presentation of Women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Hues of African Culture

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### Abstract

African Literature with its vast spectrum ranges from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages and interestingly reveals many powerful political and cultural structures that operate to keep segregations intact. Culture as a complex social apparatus dices the norms and regulations and is a stratified concept with hues that light up the disillusionment and dissent. Multiculturalism indeed has appreciated the difference in cultures but has also made avenues accessible to analyze it from queer perspectives. Chinua Achebe, to reorganize the lost confidence of Africans, represents the cultural roots of Igbos in his work *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe also refers here, how the universal principles vitiate the destructive potentials of this dignified Igbos who "had a philosophy of great depth and value...above all, they had dignity". In this effective representation of justice and dignity the value of body under the term 'women' gets significantly lower. If Achebe is known as the Patriarch of African Literature, then his biasness towards representation of women, in terms of reproduction and fetish beauty is clearly visible. Else than Ndulue, hardly any man in the Igbo culture treats women in equal terms. They, both physically and verbally abuse women. Other than comparing the women with Earth (as earth means soil which can fertilize like a women's womb) and motherhood, women are treated as no individuals with desires, dreams and future except than marrying someone and serving as a wife/maid. The story revolves around the protagonist Okonkwo and his efforts to keep up his self-pride as that "masculine man". Presentation of women (particularly Okonkwo's "wives") in Achebe's novel remains that 'hue' which gets veiled by this 'masculine' tale of Okonkwo's dignity. Therefore, in my paper I would explore the oppressive treatment and subdued identity of women in Achebe's presentation of Igbo culture.

**Keywords:** Body; Gender; Sexuality; Identity; Society

### Introduction

Post-colonial Literature deals with works produced by authors with roots in countries which were once occupied by the European nations. Chinua Achebe is one of the outstanding post-colonial writers and his novel *Things Fall Apart* [1] is regarded as the archetypal modern novel in English. It upholds the culture and pre-colonial life of the southeastern part of Nigeria and the arrival of the Europeans in the late nineteenth century. It was the first work to get published in Heinemann's African Writers Series and the one which received much global critical acclaim. *Things Fall Apart* was followed by a sequel *No Longer at Ease* and *God of Arrows*. This sequel often regarded as the African Trilogy, brilliantly presents the lives of three generations of an African community as their world is upended by the force of colonialism from the first arrival of the British to the waning days of empire.

Much of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* focuses and deals with the story of Okonkwo, his tragic self-pride and the culture of the Igbo community which through the protagonist Okonkwo presented their own cultural flaws that demands a change but along with many appreciations if viewed as a separate culture worth of respect. Culture being a stratified, complex operative device has both limited and freed many strategic divisions. When *Things Fall Apart* is viewed under the lens of multiculturalism, then Achebe's presentation of this Igbo community must be viewed as a different culture that should be studied and enjoyed which many critics have indeed done. Like Diana Akers Rhoads in her article-Culture in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, tries to forget the lending authority of one culture over the other and views the story as Africa's own unique cultural presentation by Achebe. Rhoads points out the dangers of viewing it from a Eurocentric perspective without enjoying its unique taste of African soil when she says, "...the dangers of presenting a Eurocentric vision of Achebe's novel...appreciates differences among cultures..." [2]. Rhoads, in her article delved deeper and dealt with both the pros and cons of Achebe's presentation of the

Igbo Culture. Chris Abani in an interview with Yogita Goyal, which Goyal published as an article-A Deep Humanness, a Deep Grace: Interview with Chris Abani, pointed out the cultural complexities of the Igbo community, the struggles through the tragic story of Okonkwo which is much more than just a response to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness when Abani said, "Whatever Achebe might have said prompted Things Fall Apart, a response to Mister Johnson, or a rebuttal of Heart of Darkness, his novel and the subsequent struggle of Okonkwo is larger than any of that, larger than the colonial moment"[3]. The essence of multiculturalism has indeed made many critics appreciate the Achebe's effort of uplifting the African culture.

My paper focuses on a less viewed and analyzed aspect of Achebe's Things Fall Apart, which is how women have been presented in this novel. Achebe, being known as the Patriarch of African Literature, developed the story line to colour a man's journey only, and keeping the sufferings of women quite normal, as if it is how they should be treated. Noticing this less recognized hue of African culture, which often gets unnoticed when Things Fall Apart or any other book of Achebe's African trilogy, is put under the larger cultural concepts of post-colonial tradition (that indeed attempts only to present the sufferings of the oppressed in the hands of the white colonizers and uplift the prestige of the lost African tradition) without focusing much on the intersectionality of suffering under the post-colonial feminism.

## Theoretical Interpretations

African culture with its diverse affinities has marked many attentions on its uniqueness. Culture and presentation of women dices each other into a complex fabricated network of tension that portrays incomplete and inaccurate female characters in early African works. African culture and its early works and been always dominated by men and many female critics have also argued that women were defined in terms of their relationship to men. Presentation of women has always been that of a 'passive mother', a wife and maid for the husband, and a whore/mistress for the society that comprises "great" men! This is a glimpse of the patriarchally constructed societies which shares much similar sufferings of women across the globe. What Achebe's Things Fall Apart presents is quite general yet a contrast of great heroic deed of a man in a manly, masculine manner on one side and the 'not so' great deeds of women in getting physically and verbally abused in the hands of these "great" men! Feminism, if considered a hermeneutical device which is a methodology for interpreting texts, is used to unearth the meaning of Things Fall Apart, rather than using the generally used post-colonial theory, then we can see how Achebe's presentation of women in the tragic journey of Okonkwo, is nothing beyond objectification, oppression, violence on bodies defined as 'women', only because what the "men" in Igbo culture values and recognizes is the heteronormative, heterosexual relations which requires an objectified culture to define women. While reading Achebe's work critically from a feminist percept and using Judith Butler's Gender theory, the struggles and sufferings of women to which Achebe gave much less importance while attempting to uplift the cultural pride

through Okonkwo's journey gets prominent. A sense of African Dilemma gets portrayed in presentation of women by African male authors in early African literary works.

Achebe's Things Fall Apart is a novel that presents women with a sense of lack, dilemma, product for polygamy, the child-bearer, wife and household maid for the husband, and the children's educator. The construction of the image of women in Achebe's work is nothing more than their relation to men. The concept of 'body' has been the core identity of women in the Igbo culture, identities with whom women in the Igbo culture has been defined and marked are only bodily values like comparing the men's desire for a women in the Igbo culture with the desire a man has for 'wrestling' because one can win, conquer and subdue the other just like a man did to a woman while consuming her body like-"Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire...he trembled with desire to conquer and subdue...like the desire for women" (Achebe, 31). The novel opens describing Okonkwo's achievement and personality as a wrestler with the help of wrestling match-"Okonkwo was well known throughout...his fame rested on solid personal achievements...he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat...the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten...". What is important to note is that the sports used as a device to describe Okonkwo is immensely a sport to describe masculinity at its best. The story starts by focusing on the stratified power blocs allocated with Gender. Moreover, Okonkwo's identity rests not only as a wrestler but how many 'wives' and children he had "his three wives and eight children" (Achebe, 11). This is how the identity of man in Igbo community was calculated by number of objects he is able to buy(wives) and the number of products he can produce out of it "There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children" (Achebe, 15). Women here are clearly constructed as objects that are equal to the subject's (man) property, the more wives, that means more properties, so greater the wealth! Polygamy is completely honorable for a man! It is like buying an object and using them by providing a shelter to live with. The 'wives' does not even stay in the same hut as Okonkwo stays, the women and their children has separate huts "...his wives and children in their out-houses" (Achebe, 3).

Gender and Sexuality are two most complexly designed, culturally constructed and ambiguously inter-related terms used within the spectrum of Feminism that considers "sex" as an operative term to theorize its deconstructive cultural perspectives. As Stevie Jackson and Jackie Jones regarded in her article-Contemporary Feminist Theory that "The concepts of gender and sexuality as a highly ambiguous term, as a point of reference" [4]. Helene Cixous notes in Laugh of Medusa that men and women enter the symbolic order in a different way and the subject position open to either sex is different. Cixious's understanding that the center of the symbolic order is 'phallus' and every-body surrounding it stands in the periphery makes women (without intersectionality) as the victim of this phallogocentric society. One needs to stop thinking Gender as inherently linked to one's sex and that it is natural.

To say, nothing is natural. Body is just a word (as Judith Butler said in her book *Gender Trouble* [1990]) that is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of 'power' to operate. It has been a "norm" to connect one's sexuality with their Gender and establish that as "naturally built". The dichotomy of 'phallus/vagina' over years has linked itself to make/female understanding of bodies. Emphasizing this "inherent" link between one's gender and sexuality, in this paper I would draw few instances from some literary works which over time reflected how the gender-female/women characters are made to couple up with a male/man presenting the inherent, coherent compulsory relation between one's gender and sexuality obliterating any possibility of 'queer' relationships.

One needs to stop thinking Gender as inherently linked to one's sex and that it is natural. To say, nothing is natural. Body is just a word (as Judith Butler said in her book *Gender Trouble* [1990]) that is strategically used under artificial rules for the convenience of 'power' to operate. Though Feminism started with the voices of women claiming their rights back during the Seneca Falls Convention (1848), with time Feminism treated Gender Equality not only associated with women but with all oppressed and suppressed sections of societies irrespective of anything. Feminism stands for 'inclusivity' that can act as a core for Gender Equality. Equality can only function if society starts including all voices that demands equal rights as humans before getting tagged by rights based on their Genders, when society will move beyond identifying bodies with "natural" identities. Gender is just a word that is travelling without destination and until we try to fix its destination all humans can be treated equally irrespective of Gender. Therefore, for a world beyond Gender Difference, needs to stop marking and 'demarking' human identities based on 'body'. Hence it is important to focus on deconstructing the stereotypical gendered methods of scrutinizing, which not only gives rise to issues and challenges but results in dehumanization of humans. In this paper I would explore how the operation of the "inherent link" between Gender and Sexuality has made "women" a victimized character in many literary works.

Sexuality is not with whom we have sexual activity rather it determines towards whom we are sexually attracted. It has been a "norm" to connect one's sexuality with their Gender and establish that as "naturally built". The dichotomy of 'phallus/vagina' over years has linked itself to make/female understanding of bodies. However sexuality becomes more complex because it draws the 'desire' of a human body into consideration and when it does so it establishes an inherent link between sex and gender and desire. But as Judith Butler said in *Gender Trouble*, "sex" is not "natural"; sex (male/female) is seen to cause gender (masculine-men/feminine-woman) which then is seen as a kind of continuum. Butler emphasizes the fact that identity is free floating and not connected to one's 'essence rather performance'. As Mary McIntosh in her article-*Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* said, "The way forward, instead, involves recognizing that gender attributes are performative rather than expressive" [5]. Desire or sexuality then becomes 'free-floating' and not connected to one's Gender/Sex. The problem arises when

the society determines the connectivity and tries to establish the coherence between sex/gender/desire by presenting a human body with 'vagina' is bound to become a 'woman' and 'desire' a man confirming the heterosexuality and following it as the "ideal norm". Perhaps this "ideal norm" makes any "body" trying to deviate from the "legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality" [6] was a victim of patriarchy and as what Michel Foucault said in *The History of Sexuality* that "The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality had more right to discretion. It tended to function as a norm, one that was stricter, perhaps but quieter". Butler deconstructs this inherent connection and the 'compulsory order' of sex/gender/desire by stating that it is not sex that leads to gender and that leads to desire rather it is the 'mis-pre-understanding' which originates from one's "normative" desire, meaning heterosexuality is "norm", so a "man" has to have a "natural" phallus stating that it is desire that leads to gender that leads to sex ". If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called "sex" is a culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all" [7].

"Women", as patriarchy defines them are only those with "genitalia" and the 'intersectionality' is completely essentialized for 'identity' is only defined in parameter to "body" and "sex" which over years of 'cultural practice' have resulted in being "natural" and this is important to understand the intersectionality of the term "woman" which has been essentialized by our "benevolent patriarchal" world! The identity of what a "woman" is gets trapped in the supposed links between 'sex' and 'gender' to be inherently related and 'culturally' bound. The concept of "women" as Butler defines Women are the sex which is not "one". Within...a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable...women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" [7]. Projecting the plight of "women" and restrictions imposed upon them is because they are 'marked'. As Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* [8] that men are considered universal so are left unmarked while women becomes "women" because they are marked, restricted and norms are imposed upon them. But inspite this glorious hues of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* [1], women have been presented in this novel as products and victims of this 'compulsory' link of gender (women) and sexuality (their desire that has to be for a man). African culture with its diverse affinities has marked many attentions on its uniqueness. Culture and presentation of women dices each other into a complex fabricated network of tension that portrays incomplete and inaccurate female characters in early African works.

The life of Okonkwo's 'wives' were a representation of the women of the Igbo community. Their only role was to look after the children and serve foods to their husband as we see how their mother cooked and their children served "Okonkwo was sitting on a goatskin already eating his first wife's meal. Obiageli, who had brought it from her mother's hut...". Achebe's attempts to show what his novel constitutes-a world comprising bodies which are categorized and defined, identified and believed just due to the

assigning of the terms “man” and “woman” on them! Achebe’s Igbo community like many other communities of present times fails to realize that bodies are all words whose meanings can and always change and evolve, one can never ‘grasp’ the exact, correct definition of any “body” defined as a definite form. As Judith Butler [7] argues regarding the “metaphysics of substance” in which she writes about the definition of “self” and quotes from one of the critiques of “metaphysics of substance” Michel Haar that the very “notion of psychological person as a substantive thing.” Further, Butler, to emphasize on the fact that body is just a “word”, quotes “...The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at start only a linguistic reality”. The Igbo community believes in this word “body” immensely and particularly in cases of women and marks them accordingly for which we could see how Achebe narrates to describe what a woman is and how they are used in the Igbo community. The women’s identity in this community is nothing beyond ‘just a body to satisfy the male flesh and desire, to assist and help the men to keep up their prestige by being the child-bearers and properly grooming them up, as we see how a “virgin” girl whose name is not needed was used as a compensation for the murdered wife of another men named Ogbuefi Udo-“...the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife”. A product in replacement of another product! In *Things Fall Apart*, women’s definition as patriarchy imposes is nothing beyond “body”. This concept makes it clear why “Ani played a greater part in the life of the people...”. Ani means earth and earth means fertility and production, which is the only way how women were treated. In such a patriarchal setup for women, their roles, behavior were also limited and marked. Women cannot behave or perform whatever they liked. Like when Enzima sat with his father Okonkwo, he scolded her and said-“sit like a woman!” and when she asked that would she bring him a chair, he restricted her saying-“No, that is a boy’s job”. Okonkwo often regretted that why was Enzima not a boy, “She should have been a boy”. Everything in the Igbo community was so gendered, that women silently suffered every moment!

Achebe obliterated any possibility beyond heterosexual marriage and this marriage grew from their childhood understanding of male with immense masculinity and females with femininity for continuing the community. But this marriage was very insulting for the women as they were sold in accordance to how much “ripe”, “fresh” they were for marriage, which means whether they are able to produce, are they on their menstrual time already were the “hidden” meaning of these words. When men came to see and purchase the product they want to buy, the women (product) decorated their bodies with jewelries to be attractive along with their “natural ripeness” “She was about sixteen and ripe for marriage. Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe enough”. Marriage in the Igbo community was nothing beyond a game where women were sold as brides with bride price “Marriage should be a play...In this way Akueke’s bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries...the two parties came to this agreement”. Physical abuse was very common which

Okonkwo did to his wives and except for Ndulue, hardly any man in the Igbo culture treats women in equal terms. A man finds it is “okay” to beat and abuse women because they are inferior to the superior men who can do everything “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...when she was pregnant, he beat her until she miscarried” [9,10].

## Discussion and Conclusion

The novel continues to present women as objects who are sold, used and tortured. Masculinity, Patriarchy overwhelms Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, when viewed beyond the mainstream post-colonial analysis-the ‘black’s suffering under the white ‘and is scrutinized from the lens of post-structuralist, post-colonial feminist and gender theory. The hues of African culture can bring numerous interpretations, as a text can have “infinite plurality” of meanings and it evolves and changes as there is no particular point where the meaning of anything could be “fixed” and Woolf Gang Iser regards a text to be “inexhaustible” as a text can be analyzed from numerous imaginations trying to fill the gaps provided in a text. Interpreting the text with this inexhaustible network of interpretations *Things Fall Apart* thus then stands as a novel where Women throughout the hover, quivers. They do not have any identity of their own nor are they taught to create one. They only make meaning along with the male figures surrounding them to “protect” them! The social and cultural situation is presented in such a way that the real condition of the community in which the man is the ‘signifier’ and the women ‘signified’ is clearly revealed. Thus both politically and domestically women are men’s possession, the ‘other’ to the subject (men)! This patriarchal social construction is rooted in every culture that is a part of this complex network of multiculturalism. Therefore Achebe’s novel adds up ‘inexhaustible’ hues.

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