

THINGS RESTORED IN THE ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH: A POST-MODERNIST REVIEW OF ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

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Abstract

*Chinua Achebe's writing stands for many things. Some believe he is a cultural and Political historian – simply documenting the effect of new ideologies and their effect on the body polity of his society. Others believe he is a vanguard of African culture and the definite hero who is credited with reviving the distorted image of the African as portrayed by the alien lenses of Western imperialism. What is not in doubt, however, is Achebe ingenious ability to capture the undercurrent of emotive issues at every stage of the growth of his society. This work lays emphasis on the portrayal of gender in his two books which have generated relatively more controversy in this subject. From a post-modernist posture, the study investigates Achebe's purpose in his portrayal of women in *Things Fall Apart*; the emotive reactions this has generated; and how the author reconciles this fracture in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The method involves an analysis of primary texts, relevant library commentaries and internet resources. Findings reveal Achebe's continued relevance as a universal and timeless writer; and with his sensitivity and empathy for his fellow man, as demonstrated in his writing, his works will stand the test of time as a pathfinder in the search for representative theories of African literatures.*

Keywords: Historian, African Culture, Imperialism, Gender, Post-modernism, African Fiction

Introduction

Many reviewers have poured accolades on Achebe, praising him for his neutrality in his narration of *Things Fall Apart* as a realistic novel. However, much of the critical discussion about *Things Fall Apart* concentrates on the socio-political aspects of the novel, including the friction between the members of Igbo society as they are confronted with the intrusive and overpowering presence of Western government and beliefs (Emenyonu2011). He comments further that,

Things Fall Apart is indeed a classic study of cross-cultural misunderstanding and the consequences to the rest of humanity, when a belligerent culture or civilization, out of sheer arrogance and ethnocentrism, takes it upon itself to invade another culture, another civilization.

One of the issues that critics have continued to discuss is whether Okonkwo serves as an embodiment of the values of Umuofia or stands in conflict with them. This discussion often centers on the question of Okonkwo's culpability in the killing of the boy, Ikemefuna. Many critics have argued that Okonkwo was wrong when he goes against the clan and becomes involved in the killing of the boy. Other reviewers insist that he had no choice as he was expected to obey the dictates of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. There are also critics who compare *Things Fall Apart* to a Greek tragedy see Okonkwo as a tragic hero. Aron Aji and Kirstin Lynne Ellsworth (1992) have stated,

As numerous critics have observed, Okonkwo is at once an allegorical everyman figure embodying the existential paradoxes of the Igbo culture in transition, and a great tragic hero in the tradition of Oedipus, Antigone, and Lear.

Many have complimented Achebe's *choice* to write in the language of the colonizers, lauding his ingenious manipulation of the English language but this is hardly a matter of choice, as there is no way the author could have reached his audience, in particular the western evolutionist theorists to whom his writing was addressed at the time, and neither would he have reached the unprecedented readership across cultures and languages as he did, if he had not spoken in the colonialist's tongue. Several reviewers have also noted his use of African images and proverbs to convey African culture and oral storytelling and commenting on this, Arlene A. Elder (2003) has asserts that the author's use of proverbs greatly enhances the richness of *Things Fall Apart*.

Post-modernism and Gender in *Things Fall Apart*

Post-modernism is iconoclastic in its abandon of structured theories such as classical realism, formalism and rationalism and, the "analysis of the subjective response of the reader within a psychological, social and historical context" (10). A new playfulness, a new insouciance, irony, cynicism and, sometimes, downright nihilism, are all imbricated within the hermeneutic circle of postmodernism (10). Thus, countercultural movements as well as bohemian subcultures seem to have a field day colonizing textual/sexual space, with conventional moralism beating a terminal retreat. Welcome to the "unleashing of instinct, impulse, and will" (12), a post-Nietschean age which "exhibits an extension of the rebellious, anti-bourgeois, antinomic and hedonistic impulses"

According to Ezeigbo, the ongoing gender situation has created great disparities, dichotomies, polarities and complexities between the sexes in society which reflect the ages-old battle of the sexes. She draws attention to the fact that gender is socially produced or culturally derived (Ezeigbo xiii). Radical feminist critics claim that "men create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described" (Catherine Mackinnon 537; qtd. in Ezeigbo xii). This faulty gender stereotyping leaves the female in a precariously marginalised position, making her an existential outsider whose physiological features render her invisible and condemned to insignificance. The othering of the feminine is fraught with role differentiation based on patriarchally-structured birth-dependent inferiority of the female sex. Tradition has therefore implicitly encouraged and engendered the psychic repression of femaleness, relegating girls and women to the backseat in society's development as though there is biological proof that they are mentally deficient.

While arrogating normative order to itself, phallogentrism deprecates the "second sex," as the psychoanalytic term 'penis-envy' amply testifies. Until recently, group survival and

social mobility was driven and propelled by values of brawn as against the application of wit, manliness as against intellectual graces such as mental acuity, intelligence and insight. Although from the beginning of time, human civilization has been based on the complementary role of reason and passion (or brute force), as society got increasingly technologically sophisticated and more complex, there has been less and less dependence on these social values of raw physical energy or animal strength conventionally designated as "male" to a greater dependence on such values as intellectual acumen, cerebral strength and imagination formerly deprecatingly dubbed "female." Thus, the world of today is principally powered by the "female" principle, thereby making the "female" in all of us reassert itself as the propulsive force of progressive change and social transformation. Read against this backdrop, the character and the personality of the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, namely, Okonkwo, and those of other characters such as Unoka, Nwoye, Obierika and Ezinma, can meaningfully be fully re/presented and therefore, reinterpreted? By all accounts, Okonkwo remains "male" no matter the methodological benchmark by which we try to assess him: a flat character embodying the best in the Igbo culture's notion of manliness and masculinity, the very measure of "male" potential on the one hand and on the other, totalizing the very worst in the society's idea of balance, moderation, cool-headed pragmatism, compassion, commonsensical, savvy and humaneness. Okonkwo is not the shining beacon on a hill for his tribe, the paragon of communal manly ideal, congenitally and incrementally flawed as he is. This ostensibly lopsided nature of the Okonkwo persona is what the novelist, Chinua Achebe, seeks to rectify through the creation of the person of Obierika. There has been a steady burgeoning in the interpretive as well as the exegetical excursus of the Okonkwo-Obierika polarity, thus giving rise to kindred binarisms. Not much interpretive capital will be procured or/and discursive purpose served by any gratuitous meta-criticism on that score here. Suffice it to comment in passing that most of the commentaries on the Okonkwo-Obierika nexus rightly stress the two characters' psychic interpenetration. The standard procedure for this has been the so-called complementary duality as a principle of characterization. Accordingly, Obierika ceases in the process, on the one hand, to be a distinct single human entity, an individual, and, on the other hand, he still remains a full-blooded specimen of a homo-aviator, even far more realized and, consequently, more likeable and real - character-in-the-round. To adumbrate this point further based on the strategy of complementary duality in character drawing, Obierika becomes an appendage or an extension of Okonkwo, the main human vehicle on whom the narrative's movement of meaning and significant idiom is anchored. This reading, verging on tendentiousness as it might seem, is in part informed by the implicit wisdom in the Adrienne Rich dictum, cited earlier on. Stretched logically, Okonkwo's multiple selves/personalities comprehend and subsume other less iconic figures such as his confidant-friend, Obierika. This is more so because Okonkwo is portrayed as almost entirely "male." In *Things Fall Apart*, we are told: "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (20). Okonkwo's view of women has been assumed by some critics to be representative of the author. Taking this position, Peterson (2011) claims that

Achebe's traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs . . . The obvious

inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe (253-254).

This study, from a post-modernist reading of *Things Fall Apart* reveals the intricate weaving of meaning in this classic of a man at war with his society and like his proverbs, hence it sets out to dispute previously held assertions in this direction. If Achebe is indeed merely documenting what is, after all the status quo of gender profile of his Igbo society, the portrayal of women may not represent his own personal view. Christopher Anyokwu (2011) claims that while Okonkwo seeks to replicate his own excessive masculinity in Nwoye and his other sons, he is at the same time, able to identify these elements of masculinity in his daughter Ezinma. The fact that Okonkwo, the stereotypical alpha male could acknowledge the residence of male characteristics in a female body and wish that this child was “male”, rather than “female”, suggests that (as a documentation of the “truth” of Igbo culture), the author would appear to deviate from the culturally accepted profile, and rather, project his own belief that gender is not biologically determined, but is culturally constructed and goes on to create an admirable social iconoclast in *Ezinma*. Anyokwu’s claim that Achebe plays a cruel trick on Okonkwo by imbuing a girl with male traits is hardly tenable, as the reader is persuaded to admire the “aberrant” characters of *Ezinma*. By describing Nwoye as “degenerate and effeminate,” and as “a woman (110), that is “female”; and *Ezinma* as “male” despite her sex (Pg. 27), Achebe reveals the pressure that social expectations bring to bear on individuals who demonstrate what is considered aberrant behaviour and the ruthless punishment that comes with it. This is exemplified in *Nwoye* who endures the scorn of *Okonkwo*, his father, and not willing to change his disposition, turns to those willing to accept him – the new religion of Christianity, with its teaching of love and unconditional acceptance, the very thing which he longs for but cannot hope to ever have from his super male father-figure. *Ezinma*, on the other hand is bold and daring in her actions and speech in a way that reveals a strong resemblance to her father, *Okonkwo*, leading to his repeated wish that she was a boy. *Ezinma* alone seems to win *Okonkwo*’s full attention, affection, and, ironically, respect. The question then, is, if we grant that a biologically-defined female possesses some of the characteristics of “maleness” ascribed to men by patriarchy, can such a woman then qualify to be called “male” and vice versa? These questions assume greater significance against the assertion of Adrienne Rich that “every mind resides in a body?” (qtd. in Ezeigbo viii). This would suggest that,

in every man (or woman) there are both “male” and “female” traits; the more pronounced or predominant sexual traits give the individual his/her gender identity. Following from this premise a man may be referred to as “female” if he acts like a woman and vice versa. In the traditional symbolic order of representation, the male genital, otherwise known as “the phallus” is taken to be the principal signifier of power and authority: the index of male. And being male connotes masculinity, manliness, valour, courage, animal force of will and raw physical strength.

As Nwagbara asserts

Achebe has ideo-aesthetically crafted a vision of women that ensconces motherhood as power. Thus, “Nneka, they

said. Mother is supreme” (98). For Achebe, this kind of power is acquired through enlightenment and self-discovery as well as reconstruction of the primeval notion of motherhood. This is fleshed out in a dialogue between Ikem and Beatrice, as Ikem comes to shocking awakening that women should be given due recognition in the society as against the roles traditional institutions offered.

Thus in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe creates Beatrice, Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance, as a strong, independent-minded, and politically empowered Nigerian woman. “That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib” (80-81). Similarly, Ezinma is a young woman who sensibly agrees to put off marriage until her family returns from exile so as to help her father leverage his sociopolitical power most effectively. In doing so, she demonstrates her father's need of help and puts strategy in place of emotion and is a foreshadowing of Achebe's delivery of Beatrice in *The Anthills*.

By creating Beatrice as a woman who has “an honors degree from Queen Mary College, University of London in *Anthills*, Achebe launches projects vision of women's roles as Beatrice gives Ikem greater understanding into the feminist ideology of femaleness. As an articulate and independent who is self-trained, Achebe affirms the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women...(Rose U. Mezu, “Women in Achebe's World,” Postcolonial Web)

With no male to lead the naming ceremony for the now-deceased Ikem's daughter, Beatrice takes on the task by performing it himself. She says,

In our traditional society . . . the father named the child. But the man who should have done it today is absent . . . I think our tradition is faulty there. It is really safest to ask the mother what her child should be called (206).

By breaking with tradition, Beatrice's action suggests a new beginning, symbolizing a subversion of Western and African traditions. Beatrice leads the change, forcing the others to adapt with what is present. The suggestion that “Achebe appears to have seen the fault of his previous opinions, realizing the need for women declare their own place in African society, if it is ever to heal itself and progress onwards” may be reviewed, because under post-modernist scrutiny, he may have been a feminist in the closet; and afraid of inviting his society's scorn, had given us a view of the enormous strength that resides in the woman in the character of the ever sickly, yet stronger than a man Ezinma.

During the naming ceremony at the novel, the idea of women empowerment is further tied to the strengthening of the country, reflecting the ideas which Ikem introduced explores his letter. When Elewa's uncle arrives at Beatrice's house to find that Elewa's child has already been named a boy's name meaning “may-the-path-never-close” by the women, he is at first astonished by the breach of the cultural order of male supervision, but later accepts the new order as reflected in the following speech:

Do you know why I am laughing like this? I am laughing because in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit... My wife here was breaking her head looking for kolanuts, for alligator pepper,

for honey and for bitterleaf. . . And while she is cracking her head you people gather in this whiteman house and give the girl a boy's name. . . That is how to handle this world. . . (210)

In *Anthills*, Achebe seeks to link the question of African women's roles to the larger problems of the post-colonial nation rather than oppose it. Ikem's "love letter" to Beatrice, in promotes the novel's vision of women-centered denouement. In Ikem's love letter, Achebe speaks for the men of his society and indeed for the world, that the major flaw in the world's vision is its failure to support the women as leaders.

Conclusion

In an interview granted to Carol Cooper of the *Voice*, Cooper wanted to know what the female characters represent in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe unties the knot in his misinterpreted fiction when he says that

the female characters represent the very thing which the male-dominated society does not consider. If you go back to *Things Fall Apart*, all the problems Okonkwo has from beginning to end are related to ignoring the female. And that is where he is a flawed hero. Women stand for compassion (3pg. 28)

To have waited fifty eight years to finally savor the true flavor of this proverbial work is nothing less than intellectually ecstatic and in true Achebe style, he has unveiled his artistic vision for women. Ezinma, the strong girl is reincarnated fifty years later in Beatrice, and in a post-modernist utopia, things are finally restored in *Anthills of the Savannah* .

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