



WOMEN AND THE COLONIAL SPACE: A RE-SIGNIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

In this article, the re-signification of women in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is examined, placing them as agents of change and resistance within the colonial space. An allusion to two well-known colonial texts that continue to obliterate and marginalize African women: Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* buttress this discourse on the African women in colonial space. Using a Postcolonial Feminist perspective, this study looks at how Achebe's depiction of Igbo women subverts colonial preconceptions and patriarchal conventions that have traditionally marginalized and repressed them. Through highlighting the experiences of women such as Ekwefi, Ojiugo, and Ezinma, Achebe challenges the prevailing colonial narrative and demonstrates the intricate and varied roles that women played in preserving cultural identity such as emotional, spiritual and cultural roles; opposing colonialism, and influencing the course of their communities. Women are humanized and empowered by this re-signification of them in the colonial sphere, which also emphasizes their agency and contributions to the fight against colonialism. By reclaiming and revaluing the lives, experiences, and viewpoints of women in the colonial space, *Things Fall Apart* provides a potent counter-discourse to the colonial enterprise, as this study ultimately shows.

Keywords: women of African descent, colonial space,

Introduction

The need to re-signify the representation of the African Woman in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* rests on the assumption that there is a pre-existing signification which is premised on the cultural space and time within which *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) is situated. At this time, culture is considered a great enabler that is disabling (McDermott and Varenne, 1995:336) particularly to women. In the same light, Ajinomoh (2018:315) argues that the:

Hegemonic relation in a patriarchal setup legitimizes and assigns oppression to women. It is this oppression that accounts for the disablement that confronts the feminine gender in such setups. In contrast, the male figure becomes a prosthesis or crutch which the female must depend upon for social, marital and cultural relevance. Thus, getting married, giving birth to children and conforming to social, religious and cultural expectations are all made possible by the prosthetic aid of a masculine figure.



The excerpt points to the tendencies of male hegemony within the African colonial space and the “second fiddled” role that women supposedly play within such cultures. This was indeed a recurring theme and subject of critical interest in the emergent African Literatures. At this point, the treatment of the African woman within the patriarchal system became a metaphor for the oppression of colonies by the colonial powers. There is no doubt that the novel TFA is considered one of the first Master pieces that projected Africa to the world as it is. It was also a repudiation of an “epistemology of ignorance” which had been furnished by the Euro-centric creative and critical literary enterprise that dominated the African literary-scape at the time. The cultural framework that inspired the thematization of and characterization in TFA was therefore predominantly patriarchal. Thus, the representation of women in the texts is done from a standpoint of patriarchy. Most critical works have in line with such arguments described such representations as derogatory especially those authored by women critics. Muthui and Muhoro (2022: 4513), for instance, aver that:

The female gender is seen as subsidiary characters in this text and their good deeds are not recognized. In fact, in this text where female characters tend to outshine the male characters the female gender is demeaned. A good example is when Ezinma portrays a sense of brightness; Okonkwo always wishes she were a boy. Thus, the female characters are placed at subsidiary level.

Such a view continues to find expression in discourses that advocated the liberation of women from cultural oppression and chauvinistic representations. This is so because women continue to advocate their emancipation from the oppressive practices of patriarchy which has relegated them to the background as home makers and child rearers. The gender roles as required by culture and tradition largely favored the men than the women because the traditional institution assigns power and authority to the men. The excesses of patriarchy became the premise upon which women advocated emancipation because they were rendered handicapped by cultures and traditions they considered favorable to the men. Again, this explains why early literary critical works (especially by women) were reactionary and done from the stand point of bias against male projections of female characters. In view of this, it is necessary to critically re-examine such criticisms against the background of gender roles within a patriarchal setup and their underlying implications for the growth and development of society. For instance, rather than emphasizing the “second fiddle” narrative of women, we could examine motherhood as an important and foundational aspect of building society. If indeed, the “Feminists are engaged in the struggle for a fundamental change in gender relations so as to recognize the role of women as full and active participants in the development process” (Yeseibo, 2013:82), then it is important to also acknowledge the important roles they play and are portrayed to play in African literature. The task therefore is to examine the contributions of women to the overall development of society particularly within the colonial space.

As it stands, the portrayal of women in African literature is complex and multifaceted but it has not always been so, what obtains now is a product of Cultural Revolution and Evolution. African literature, being a medium of conveying these Cultural Revolution and Evolution, has itself evolved over time, leading to a significant change in the portrayal of women and the critical engagements that follow. The Pre-Colonial and Colonial era saw the practice of patriarch in its crudest form. In these periods, women were largely depicted as marginal figures, who operated with a limited agency and power. Such depictions portrayed women as subservient to men, occupying roles that limited them to domestic duties.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative research design which deploys a critical mode of engaging context in relation to the text. The idea is to engage both the reading and writing formations in the interpretative process. The Qualitative Research Method allows for an elaborate and systematic conceptualization and examination of human subjectivity (Brown, 2008:699). In this case, the paper examines existing arguments informed by bias against male dominance and patriarchal culture.



Reference is made to both primary and secondary sources. These sources serve to foreground and interrogate feminist arguments and positions on the representation of women in *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, a critical reading of Chinua Achebe's *TFA*. The task in this paper is to examine these "questionable" roles not as an end in themselves but a means to an end that is crucial to the development of social and cultural formations. This paper approaches this claim through a critical examination of *TFA* and the roles of female characters within the text.

African Women in Colonial Space: An Overview

Heart of Darkness portrays African women through a Eurocentric prism and largely marginalizes them. Although Conrad's depiction of African women is brief, it is noteworthy in the role of the African queen connected to Kurtz. Eroticism and exoticism are used to define this persona, who represents darkish nature and atavistic attraction. African female characters' lack of complexity is a reflection of Conrad's larger propensity to reduce non-European people to tropes or symbols rather than fully formed people. Conrad's criticism of colonialism, which emphasizes the exploitation and dehumanization of Africans, particularly women, may be observed in his portrayal of African women. But this representation has also come under fire for bolstering the "otherness" of African people and promoting racist prejudices.

The statement provides a critical interpretation of *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, emphasizing the reductive and Eurocentric portrayal of African women. It draws attention to how African female characters - Particularly the "African queen" connected to Kurtz - are marginalized and used symbolically. Instead of being accurately portrayed, she is portrayed with sexuality and exoticism, which resemble Western dreams. As the comment correctly notes, Conrad's African women are more symbolic than fully formed people, lacking nuance and uniqueness. This is part of a larger trend throughout *Heart of Darkness* where non-European individuals are frequently dehumanized or used as a backdrop for European men's moral and psychological issues.

Although the text exposes the cruelty and moral decay of colonialism, it paradoxically perpetuates racial and gendered prejudices, especially by portraying African women as quiet, enigmatic, and representative of a primitive "other." Conrad's anti-colonial criticism is acknowledged, but the study also acknowledges the novel's role in sustaining colonial ideology. In conclusion, the statement criticizes *Heart of Darkness* for its simplistic depiction of African women, contending that despite its denunciation of colonialism, it does not humanize those who are most impacted by it.

Mister Johnson and *Heart of Darkness* are both products of their eras, exhibiting prejudices and colonial mindsets. One may argue that these pieces' representations of African women are stereotyped and symbolic. Instead of being fully developed characters, African women are frequently employed as stereotypes or symbols. Otherized and marginalized; African women's "otherness" and lack of agency are reinforced by their recurrent marginalization in the narrative reflecting prejudices from colonialism. Due to the prejudices of the colonial era, the way African women are portrayed in these works has the potential to reinforce sexist and racist preconceptions.

The way African women are portrayed in these novels reflects the larger issues of colonialism, power struggles, and cultural conflicts. By examining these representations, we may gain a better grasp of the intricacies of colonial narratives and how they continue to influence how we see African cultures and identities.

Postcolonial Feminism as Analytical Framework

Postcolonial Feminism as theoretical framework engages colonialism, gender, race, and class all at once in its analysis of texts. It is interested in both conventional feminism and postcolonial theory. The basic assumptions of the theory begins from the distinction between the struggles of women across the globe, to the idea that the variables of history, race, gender and class each contribute to shaping women's experiences around the world and the empowerment of African women to the detriment of their core values, in terms of culture and traditions. There is also the question of social



justice for women. Some key figure that contributed to the development of Postcolonial Feminism include: Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1955-), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942) bell hooks (1952-2021), Sara Suleri (1953-2022). Postcolonial feminist readings generally analyze how literature from former colonies portrays women's struggles. The basis for these struggles is rooted in the postcolonial discourse, whose struggle extends over the domains of gender, race, ethnicity and class. According to Collins (2000:71):

The foundations of intersecting oppressions become grounded in interdependent concepts of binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.

The question of difference and otherness has become applicable in different categories. More so, the question of objectivity is often sacrificed at the instance of such engagements because the mission is to prove the limitation of one and the privilege or dominance of the other. This itself becomes the limitation of all theoretical approaches that seek to examine the struggle of "one" against the oppression of the "another". The task is to examine the gender roles more critically and find the hidden strength of the "other" within the supposed spaces of oppression. The extent to which Postcolonial Feminism is deployed therefore is to the point where it neglects the condescending but powerful roles women play within a patriarchal system. To re-echo the words of Azodo (1997:202) since we cannot say the likes of:

Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Flora Nwapa are irrelevant because Julia Kristeva, Susan Gardener, Virginia Woolf, Toril Moi, Simone de Beauvoir, and bell hooks, to mention only a few, have already dealt with all the issues that affect women, including African women? To say so would be to ignore the fact that there existed a complementarity of male and female roles in precolonial African societies and that it is during and after colonization that the downfall of the African woman from a position of power and self-sovereignty to becoming man's helper occurred.

The extent to which the latter is true, is what opens up the argument in this paper. If indeed, the roles were complementary, it meant it had some socio-cultural significance in the precolonial space and the enforcement of communality. The question is, at what point some of these roles become derogatory and oppressive? This paper examines three roles projected in *Things Fall Apart* that illustrate a deep level of participation by women in building and sustaining certain socio-cultural values.

Emotional, Spiritual and Cultural Roles of Women in *Things Fall Apart*

The precolonial space has always been portrayed as a patriarchal space that is predominantly hostile to women, especially when we consider the entire arguments from the perspective of women emancipation and social justice for women. Achebe, like most early male authors, has been described as sexist. Nnolim (2009:165) points out that:

Right from the Edenic myth to modern times, women have been depicted as angels with feet of clay, as purveyors of unhappiness both for themselves and for their male counterparts. The image of women in African literature is a gloomy one, compounded by the unhelpful hand of tradition and patriarchy.

This position, leaves much to be desired in terms of the need for a balance criticism of the portrayal of the woman in African Literature. There is however a different angle to this position which is valid when considered from the standpoint of the complementarity of gender roles within a patriarchal setup. *Things Fall Apart* has always been examined from the lens of women emancipation and social justice. This is why the study of the portrayal of women in the text is often done against the background of certain postcolonial and postmodern conditions which are all



products of an interaction with the outside world. As earlier mentioned, the context within which the characters were projected were largely traditional and organic. The characters within Achebe's narrated world will perhaps not have considered their role as condescending and derogatory because they were part of a culture which they are obligated to honor and sustain. Within the same context, certain roles assigned to women had more serious implications for the sanity and growth of the community or communal life. Some of these duties were culture specific and instrumental to ensuring balance within the communal structure of such localities. There are three aspects of such significant obligations or duties that are noticeable in *Things Fall Apart*. They include; the role of providing emotional balance, the role of culture preservation, through creative ingenuity and the role of spirituality in other words serving as spiritual guide.

Emotional Balance

The significance of emotional intelligence in child rearing and the fostering of peace in the home and society at large cannot be down played. In *TFA* Okonkwo's wives served as a source of emotional balance for the family because Okonkwo himself "was ruled by one passion - o hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness" (p.10). Okonkwo's lack of gentleness made him impatient and emotionally unavailable for his children especially Nwoye who was already "developing into a sad-faced youth" (p.10). The role of child rearing is not a condescending role. It is important because it contributes to the overall building of a healthy society. The character of Ikemefuna, for instance, is described as belonging to the clan when Okonkwo handed him over to his wife for care. In this sense, he passes as a metaphor for the children of the entire clan. To entrust him to his wife is no small task considering the manner he was whisked off his homeland. This illustrates the heavy sense of responsibility that lies with the woman because in raising the child, she is also raising a community.

Again, the question of the emotional balancing role of a woman is expressed in the willingness of Okonkwo's mother's people to accept him, when he was banished from Umuofia. They recount the paradox of the situation thus, "A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka- "Mother is Supreme" (p.96). The explanation put forward is that a mother is always there to protect in other words, emotionally available. What this means is that when "there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland" (p. 97). Okonkwo himself enjoys this emotional support from his mother's people when he suffers banishment from Umuofia his fatherland. The argument here is that women play a significant role in ensuring not just the balance of the family but also the balance of society since they provide emotion support for their children and even husband. This role resonates through *TFA* and it is worthy of acknowledging even in the midst of those roles pointed to as negative. In some sense, the narrative journey of the text, is sustained also by this role. To end the narrative line would have been to insert three wives that are unwilling to honor their roles. Perhaps, Okonkwo's end would have been earlier and even more tragic.

Spiritual Role

Another significant role portrayed by women, which is worth pointing to in *TFA* is the spiritual role. It is quite honoring to women that the determinant of victory for the Umuofia clan in times of war, rest with an Oracle whose face and voice is a woman. Umuofia's most potent war-medicine is feminine; "agadi nwanyi" (p.9) meaning old woman. The name of the medicine is feminine because "the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg" (p. 8). There is also, Agbala: whose priestess, during Okonkwo's childhood, was a woman called Chika. "She was greatly feared" (p. 12). The spiritual source of all fertility is feminine; "Ani" the goddess played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity; as the ultimate judge of morality and conduct (p. 26). The feast on the New Yam Festival, an important event, was held every year to honor the earth goddess. Women in this sense, are portrayed as spiritually significant and important to the overall growth and development of Umuofia.



Culture Preservation

There is also the role of culture preservation. Over time, this practice have been a means of handing down value and inculcating morals from one generation to another. In *TFA* women were portrayed to carry out this all important role. In one instance; the narrative recounts that: “Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives’ huts as each woman and her children told folk stories. Ekwefi and her daughter, Ezinma, sat on a mat on the floor. It was Ekwefi’s turn to tell a story” (p. 68). The practice of telling folktales solely rest with the women, the stories were an embodiment of certain moral values that is expected to shape the children’s moral consciousness. This in itself is a very important role because to build morally sound children is to build a morally sound society.

Conclusion

The re-signification of women in *Things Fall Apart* offers a more objective projection of the role of women within the colonial space. The argument put forward in this paper is that a critical examination of the roles of women require a balanced projection of the roles portrayed in the novel. A closer look at *TFA* therefore reveals that women in the text contribute to emotional stability, cultural conservation and important spiritual activities. Achebe’s narrative also portrays the African woman as active participants in the survival and transformation of their societies. Using the Postcolonial Feminist lens, the paper has demonstrated that women in *TFA* are not merely victims but also an integral part of the making of Umuofia. The likes of Ekwefi, Ezinma, and the priestess of Agbala signify resilience, astuteness, and agency. The presence of these qualities counter both Eurocentric and patriarchal narratives that have historically marginalized African women. Achebe’s portrayal of women in *TFA* arguably revalidates the significance of women in traditional African societies while also offering a richer and more balanced perspective on gender dynamics. Ultimately, *TFA* should not only attract a critique of colonial misrepresentations but also calls for a re-evaluation of interpretations of African cultural histories through the lens of gender. The novel also underscores the necessity of recognizing and valuing women's roles—not just in resistance to colonialism, but in the broader discourse of cultural preservation and societal continuity. The paper affirms that re-signifying women in Achebe’s narrative, and indeed other male authored first generation novels, is essential for a deeper analysis of the novel(s) and the broader historical realities they reflect.

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