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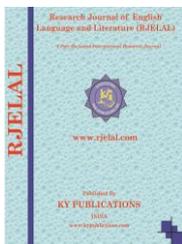
TREATMENT OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE

D. SUNDAR SINGH¹, Dr.R.SURYA PRAKASH NARAYANAN²

¹Assistant Professor in English, Ph.D Research Scholar(Part Time)

Sri Vidya College of Engg and Technology, Viridhunagar.

²Head (i/c) Dept of English, Alagappa University Model Constituent college of Arts & Science,
Paramakkudi.



ABSTRACT

This paper will raise questions on gender concepts as they are associated to Chinua Achebe's characterization of women characters. The objective of this paper is to find out how Achebe's women characters are a beautiful example of suppressor society. The description of Igbo women is really heart breaking and people have neglected the dynamics of Igbo women's historical active roles as change and cultural agents. Certainly this paper will probe and revisit Achebe's fictive women by tracing images of women presented as personage in *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* & *No Longer at Ease*.

Key words: Africa, Okonkwo, Women, suffering, Society, Igbo, Subjugation.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe is indeed a trend setter among the African novelists, who has expressed the true picture of what happening in his land and its people. He has also advocated for the Africans that they must be respected and considered as talented individuals with infinite possibilities and in this manner, he has transmuted the socio-economic, political and cultural network of Igbos from an African perspective into the artistic genre of the novel. Women in the fictional works of Chinua Achebe can be viewed as shadowy figures. The novels of Chinua Achebe have undermined the roles and responsibilities of women.

In the Igbo society women are expected to obey their husbands without any right to challenge his command. They have got to be mute and fulfill their traditionally ordained roles as compliant wives, daughters and mothers. Women are asked to assist men in the agricultural work as unpaid servants and cooks who are expected to prepare meals and take care of their children. As Neeta Pandey says,

Achebe "shows Igbo society as largely patriarchal and patrilineal" (122). If one has to be genuine in his or her words, the Igbo society is unarguably male-dominated and sometimes compulsorily compliant women with occasional moments which are assigned to them for their jollity and dominance. But it can't be denied that women are looked upon as mere 'things' or 'commodities to be bandied about used for sexual gratification and procreation.

Okonkwo beats his wife for not bringing his meal on time, even during the taboo period. "He was not the sort of man to stop beating somebody half-way through not even for fear of a goddess" (TFA 5). Apart from Okonkwo who is their only lord and master, his wives and daughters have no other individual destiny and they must follow him in and out of exile.

Ideally speaking, all the three wives suffer and grumble under the headship of Okonkwo. "During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt

fatigue. But his wives and children were not as strong, and so they suffered" (TFA 17). Here we understand the sufferings of women is not all understood or taken into consideration by their husband. Okonkwo ruled his wives and eight children with an iron hand. The subjugation of this kind is quiet common in the African society. In prior to the New Year, Okonkwo's wives would scrub the walls and huts with red earth until they became very much bright. They were so much happy in drawing patterns on them in white, yellow and green. Further they failed not to paint themselves with black patterns on their bodies and decorate the children too, especially their hair, with beautiful patterns.

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* is understood to be a person who assaults his wives and children like a man possessed. Ode Ogede remarks, "He rules his household like a tyrant, bullying his wives, intimidating his son and ill-treating the young Ikemefuna" (71). Beating wives and children was a normal domestic occurrence and tolerated in Umuofia except on certain occasions. Achebe remarks that "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (TFA 14).

During the week of peace, it is said that no one should beat or insult anyone. But much against this rule, he lost his temper and beat his wife for a small mistake. He further got infuriated when Ekwefi who is actually his favorite wife mocked at his dubious skill at schooling. He shot at her in a fit of anger. A woman is never allowed to commit a mistake knowingly and unknowingly. But at the same time it should be accepted that he did not disappoint Ekwefi. When she left her first husband being unable to live with him. Ekwefi in "*Things Fall Apart*" is presented as a tormented mother. Her daughter Ezinma is the world for her. The kind of Attitude Okonkwo had towards his wives is very much dominating and it is quiet common thing and this kind of treatment of women is a typical thing in the traditional society.

The protagonist firmly believed that a man must rule his woman. Even the Supreme God of the Ibo society as a female one. Chukwu is a female God

who is more influential than all other deities. She embodies all female values such as kindness and charity. She is the role owner of all arts. She is to be honoured at all important ceremonies and festivals such as the new year feast. The Igbo society viewed woman as objects rather than as an opposite gender. Infact "Agbala" is a term for woman, which was used as a term for calling a man who had not taken any titles from the clan.

There is a limited space allotted for women at the family level. But it is reversed with regard to important spiritual roles played by women as priestesses. The priestess of Agbala is the one who is acting like a mediator between spirituality and reality.

"No one had ever beheld Agbala, except his priestess. His priestess stood by the sacred fire which she built in the heart of the cave and proclaimed the will of the god" (TFA12)

What women don't get in reality is given to them in the supernatural world. It is seen in the case of Chika, the priestess of Agbala was "full of the power of her God and she was greatly feared" (TFA 12). It is also found out that women are respected, honoured, privileged within the world of women. For example the status of Okonkwo's first wife, Anasi :

Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting. Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built and there was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. (TFA 14)

After the terrible incident where Okonkwo's gun exploded and killed a boy, he had to go to his mother land where Uchendu calls the people of his extended family in Okonkwo's new home and asks some questions to Okonkwo :

Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why is it that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or 'Mother is Supreme'? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to his father and his family and not

to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – ‘Mother is Supreme’. Why is that?... Why is it that when a woman dies she is taken home to be buried with her own kinsmen? (TFA 94)

In the traditional Igbo society, women are portrayed as wives, mothers and priestesses. But the roles of women get changed because of sociopolitical changes and modernity plays a vital role in the change. Mary E. Modupe Kolawole says that,

Generally, women in Achebe’s works are revered and honoured as mothers. This is not strange in Igbo culture and most African traditions. Indeed, the inability to concede any other positive role to women beyond the ‘mother is gold’ and ‘mother is supreme’ ideology is at the heart of the allegation of male chauvinism as a dominant trend. (57)

In *Things Fall Apart* one can see that women keep silent against the British colonialism while men take actions and confront the cultural disintegration brought out by them. Women are assumed to be essentially objects and careful agents in the war between Umofia and Mbaino. Women are mere symbols for executing traditional rites. For example, an innocent girl of Mbaino is given and replaced for killing Ogbueli Udo’s wife. There are also few exceptions where we are able to see how Ndule lover and respects his wife, Ozoemena; “He could not do anything without telling her” (TFA 48)

Arrow of God presents its characters as more chauvinistic and patriarchal than its predecessor. Ezeulu’s story has allowed only a minor role and space for feminine characters. Women are to only fill the gaps while men are privileged to take over and dominate the spiritual, social and political lives. One can note that girls are meant to be only story tellers and tangential. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe has beautifully presented the claims and the counter-claims of rival priests and elders but the voice of women is conspicuously and surprisingly silent. The narrative focus might flick briefly over bickering wives or a young bride at her

wedding but it is the fate of the dominant male which is foregrounded. When the chief priest Ezeulu was arrested and imprisoned by the colonial power, the only area of decision for the woman has to do with which one of his wives should be sent to cook for him.

Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* gives a piece of advice to his daughter’s people and he goes on to say that “when she comes, treat her well. It is not bravery to beat his wife. I know a man and his wife must quarrel; there is no abomination in that. You may quarrel, but let it not end in fighting” (AG 64).

Even in the family of Ezeulu there was a lot of misunderstanding and disputes between the wives and mutual recrimination as well. Matefi, the senior wife never showed any love but only hatred towards Akuekiwho in fact had lost her mother. In this place, one can understand that even women sometimes take upper hand and dominate other women. In the case of Ezeulu he had to contend with his quarrelling wives.

No longer at Ease reveals the story of Clara which is interlaced into Obi Okonkwo’s experience and one can surely identify positiveness in the character of her. She is willing to be a putiable outgrowth or a bony process to Obi dream. Though she expressed true love for Obi, she is not only sincere about her status that she is an Osu, she doesn’t have self-pity also. She has self-pride and integrity. Mary E. Modupe says that

“She refuses to be presumptuous even after accepting Obi’s marriage proposal. She carefully reassesses subsequent developments. She is always ready to back out rather than take advantage of Obi’s love and patronage”. (55)

Clara never tried to use her pregnancy to blackmail Obi that he must marry her. This indeed shows that she is not self-centered even at the risk of her life. Mother of Obi is also playing a vital role as a woman who stood in middle of the relationship between Obi and Clara. She firmly declares to Obi that

“If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my

prayers, you will not wait long... But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself. (NLE 123)

The way Achebe has represented Clara and Obi's mother is definitely expressing the reality of what happens in a family. The other females in the novel play only a minor role. The Irish girl friends of Joseph and Christopher Marie Tomlinson, Obi's colleague, and Mr. Green's secretary are deployed to highlight some issues. In the novel *No Longer at Ease*, the bawdy songs about "yours women who had become nurses or teachers instead of mothers" (NLE 2) implies a devaluation of female potential that appears to be refracted in other aspects of Achebe's works.

Surely Clara had a weak-mindedness which leads her lose her courage to fight against social pressure. Clara's failing and failure are clearly suggested in her hasty retreat, hurried, cowardly withdrawal from a carping, hostile social situation. Obi, on his part, fails in a different way. Instead of overruling Clara's fear-ridden decision, he meekly submits to her will. Further, Clara was not resourceful enough to bind herself to her lover. She was also aware of her lover's failings : his indecisive nature, irresolution and inherent societal backlash. Her decision to abort her pregnancy is indicative of her lack of faith in Obi's whole-hearted support and absolute commitment.

Conclusion

Thus the women characters in the novels of Chinua Achebe have been portrayed as mere objects. It can never be denied. Obviously treatment of women in his fictions can be found in the Indian writing in English also. Indian and African writing share a lot of similarities. Certainly the plight of women in Achebe's novels evoke the sympathy of the readers.

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