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Women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)**Shram Mustafa Hama-Salih***Ph.D Student in English, Department of English, University of Pune, (M.S.) India.***Dr. Muktaja Mathkari***Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, B.M. College, Pune, (M.S.) India.***Abstract**

Achebe explicitly shows the condition of women through his novels during the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial Nigeria because his novels prominently reflect the socio-cultural aspects of Nigeria existing during his time. A Nigerian writer Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi refers Achebe as a phallic writer because she thinks that he denigrates women in his novels, especially *Things Fall Apart*. But through his novels, Achebe presents women as educators of their children. Igbo women used to tell folk stories and Igbo myths to their children to teach them about the human condition. This act of telling folk stories has an educational significance. It is useful to inculcate a sense of responsibility and imbibe the Igbo culture in the minds of their children. Boys and girls, men and women are aware of their roles and duties. In the family, women sweep and clean the house, wash the utensils, and cook food, whereas the boys or men split the firewood, pound the yam foofoo (fufu), and climb the palm trees. Achebe firmly believes in women's natural potentialities and their age-old contribution in inculcating love, affection, sense of responsibility and sensitivity in the minds of their children. He also believes that women are loving as well as brave. In this article an attempt is made to interpret Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) from feminist perspective.

Achebe never intends to portray women as weak in Igbo social and cultural lives. He is fully conscious about Igbo women's significant roles in feeding, loving and caring the family as well as preserving the family, social and cultural traditions which play significant roles in building family, society and nation. However, he is not one-sidedly ideal thinker and writer. He is fully aware of the realistic situation existing at the family and social levels during his time. He has attempted to make the novel, *Things Fall Apart* as precise of the time period as could be expected under the circumstances. He does not endeavour to put forth some expression and statement about the mal-treatment to women; he is simply telling the realities as they were in those days.

Key Words: TFA = *Things Fall apart*, Ok = Okonkwo, Ch = Chielo, NM = Nwoye's Mother, Ig = Igbo

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born on the 16th of November 1930 at Ogidi, east of Onitsha, in the eastern region of Nigeria.¹ He is one of the best known African writers and father of modern African Literature. Achebe grew up in two different modes — the African culture and the Christian attitudes. Religiously, he was both pagan and heathen. He joined the University College at Ibadan in 1948. He was a medical student but subsequently devoted himself to the study of English literature.

Achebe's works deal with the interaction of European culture with African culture. His focus is on culture and traditions of the Igbo society, and the impact of Christianity on Igbo society. Achebe views writing as an activity and believes that an African writer should be able to define his identity and display his historical roots through writing. He further believes that writing as an activity has to be used as a process to assist decolonization in Africa. Achebe is an honest and truthful writer. His purpose is to show the real image of his society. He does not glorify and romanticize the past of Africa. He wants to show the accurate past of Africa and counter the European version of Africa. His description and portrayal of the continent is both realistic and objective because he believes that it is his duty to present a true picture of his country.

His novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), deals with the period when British colonizers violently took control of Southern Nigeria. It discovers the cultural ethos and the fabric of the Igbo society in Eastern Nigeria of 1890s and the effects of the arrival of European colonizers and missionaries in the late 18th century. It further describes

destruction and disintegration of tribal culture under the pressure of colonization through trade, religion and administration. The novel shows the early days of colonization through Okonkwo, the tragic hero of the novel. The women in the novel are oppressed and exploited in a man-dominated society. They have to stay home only to cook, do house work, serve husbands and look after children.

Through the novel, Achebe clearly shows that anything strong is associated with man and anything weak is associated with woman. For example, Achebe explains that the 'yam' crop stands for manliness because of its importance as the staple crop of the Igbo. On the contrary, coco-yam, bean and cassava stand for womanliness. Women as the most hardworking individuals in their societies constitute the core of the rural work such as farming, tending animals and nurturing children. The imposition of colonial ideology and Victorian attitudes make the Nigerian women suffer the loss of their traditional status during the colonial and post-colonial periods.

In the novel, *Things Fall Apart* Achebe describes the condition of women in the Igbo society in which men are permitted to marry many times. Nwakibie, 'a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who {has} three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children'.² Women are bought and sold into marriage and after marriage they are insulted and beaten by their husbands. Obierika, a respected man in Umuofia village and a best friend of Okonkwo (an influential clan leader in Umuofia and the tragic hero of the novel) needs Okonkwo's help for negotiating the bride-price of his daughter,

Akueke. Obierika tells Okonkwo: “My daughter’s suitor is coming today and I hope we will clinch the matter of the bride-price. I want you to be there.”³ First Obierika gives a small bundle of short broomsticks to Ukegbu, father of Ibe, the suitor, which is thirty sticks, means thirty bags of cowries. They negotiate on Akueke’s bride-price from thirty bags of cowries to twenty five and then to fifteen. ‘In this way Akueke’s bride-price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries.’⁴ Okonkwo and Obierika talk about Abame and Aninta customs for bride-price that: “They do not decide bride-price as we do, with sticks. They haggle and bargain as if they {are} buying a goat or a cow in the market.”⁵ And also Obierika’s eldest brother says:

In Umunso they do not bargain at all, not even with broomsticks. The suitor just goes on bringing bags of cowries until his in-laws tell him to stop. It is a bad custom because it always leads to a quarrel.⁶

In a male-dominated society, beating a woman is very common. A woman has to stay home all day just to serve the husband and do household work. During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo because she is not at her hut and has gone out without informing him and also without preparing food for her children. Oknokwo gets angry because he thinks that he is free to do everything without informing and consulting his wives. But the wives are expected to seek his permission to do anything. Then, when she returns:

.... he {beats} her very heavily. In his anger he {has} forgotten that it {is} the Week of Peace. His first two wives {run} out in great alarm pleading with him that it {is} the sacred week.’⁷

Achebe shows Igbo as a patriarchal society which gives more importance to their sons than to their daughters. The sons’ duty is taking care of farming, getting the yam seedling reeds and keeping the farming instruments ready for farm work. Sons get involved in masquerades, wrestling matches, meetings and accompany their fathers to ceremonies, while the daughter’s world begins and ends with getting married, giving birth to children and serving the food to their husbands and children. Besides, Igbo society being a patriarchal one, lays emphasis on a woman’s capacity to give birth to more than one child, especially sons. In the novel, it is shown that the husbands would slaughter a goat for their wives if they give birth to the third son in succession. For example, when Okonkwo’s first wife, Nwoye’s mother gives birth to ‘her third son in succession, Okonkwo {slaughters} a goat for her, as {is} the custom’.⁸

Women in this novel as Achebe shows are not expected to question men as men are supposed to be “self-decisive”. Men do not like their wives questioning them. The woman is given a secondary status. She is neither the head, nor the decision-maker. She has to obey the orders given by her husband. When Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna, a fifteen year old boy from a neighbouring clan, Mbaino to his household, he orders his most senior wife,

Nwoye's mother to take care of him. She asks Okonkwo about the duration of Ikemefuna's stay with them. Okonkwo authoritatively tells her, 'do what you are told, woman'.⁹ He further says, 'when did you become one of the *ndichie* (elders) of Umuofia?'.¹⁰ 'And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions.'¹¹ The order from Okonkwo, (man of action and man of war) should be accepted and followed by the wife without knowing the reason behind it; otherwise, she is insulted and beaten.

Achebe shows that woman can achieve what is in her mind. If she wants to do anything, she can do it. For example, Ekwefi first marries to Anene, her previous husband 'because Okonkwo {is} too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene she {cannot} bear it no longer and she {runs} away to Okonkwo.'¹²

In the novel, there is a metaphysical balance between male and female principles. It is explicitly realized in the context of the major divinities of the Igbo land. The goddess of the Earth (Ani) has a male (Ezeani) as a priest, whereas the male Oracle of the Hills and the Caves (Agbala) is served by the priestess Chielo. Chielo comes to take Ezinma during the night claiming that Agbala wants to see her:

Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep. But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter.... Okonkwo was still pleading that the girl had been ill of late and was asleep. The priestess

suddenly screamed. "Beware, Okonkwo!" She warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!"¹³

Through *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is presented as brave, courageous and manly. He has not been portrayed bowing down before anyone ("beseech" with anybody) in any circumstances, but, here, readers witness that a woman orders Okonkwo to give her his little daughter. Actually, she threatens him. The way Okonkwo agrees to her order is an explicit evidence of a spiritual power of the priestess. Through this episode, Achebe clearly reveals a high degree of honour for a woman in Igbo society that she can perform the role of a priestess, a spiritual leader. Bonnie J Barthold (1981) states:

Chielo in *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies the spiritual power of the Priestess, a power recognized and honoured by the community, sanctified by ritual and invulnerable to the whims of individual men and women.¹⁴

Chielo's role as the priestess of Agbala exhibits her obligation as the caretaker of a social custom. She presents herself as a great stateswoman to the service of humanity in her society. A brave leader like Okonkwo cannot prevent Chielo from performing her spiritual duty to her society. In the dead of the night when others (male and female) experience their slumber Chielo tries her hard to keep Ezinma alive.

While reading the novel, we feel that women are not placed at a respected

position; still they perform significant role in bringing up, cultivating and preserving the Igbo family, social and cultural traditions and customs. As it is clearly seen in the novel that many of the spiritual entities comprise goddesses and Chielo as a female character plays the role of a priestess. It reveals that an image of a woman is viewed at a whole at different levels. Everyone in the Igbo society is honourably submissive to her including so called brave men.

Women are seen as agents of important social and cultural changes through the roles they play. The roles of men in this novel are limited in terms of their authority and masculine power. However, upon delving beneath this deceiving surface, readers can see that the women of the Igbo clan hold some powerful position: spiritually as the priestess, symbolically as the earth goddess, and literally as the nurturers of the Ibo people, the caretakers of the yam crops and the mothers and educators of the Igbo children. Achebe is

quite progressive and flexible in presenting his women characters. He reveals the power and strength of women in Igbo society. The women folk are helpful to their families and society in multiple ways. While describing Igbo society, it is shown that women work enthusiastically in their society shouldering responsibilities with their men; even they work more than their men because they perform household duties, look after their children, and serve their husbands and at the same time, they work outside of their kitchen to provide their families financially. For example as it is clearly explained in the novel:

As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late.¹⁵

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