

Vol II Issue VIII Feb 2013

Impact Factor : 0.1870

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

Golden Research

Thoughts

Chief Editor
Dr.Tukaram Narayan Shinde

Publisher
Mrs.Laxmi Ashok Yakkaldevi

Associate Editor
Dr.Rajani Dalvi

Honorary
Mr.Ashok Yakkaldevi

IMPACT FACTOR : 0.2105

Welcome to ISRJ

RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

International Advisory Board

Flávio de São Pedro Filho Federal University of Rondonia, Brazil	Mohammad Hailat Dept. of Mathematical Sciences, University of South Carolina Aiken, Aiken SC 29801	Hasan Baktir English Language and Literature Department, Kayseri
Kamani Perera Regional Centre For Strategic Studies, Sri Lanka	Abdullah Sabbagh Engineering Studies, Sydney	Ghayoor Abbas Chotana Department of Chemistry, Lahore University of Management Sciences [PK]
Janaki Sinnasamy Librarian, University of Malaya [Malaysia]	Catalina Neculai University of Coventry, UK	Anna Maria Constantinovici AL. I. Cuza University, Romania
Romona Mihaila Spiru Haret University, Romania	Ecaterina Patrascu Spiru Haret University, Bucharest	Horia Patrascu Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania
Delia Serbescu Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania	Loredana Bosca Spiru Haret University, Romania	Ilie Pintea, Spiru Haret University, Romania
Anurag Misra DBS College, Kanpur	Fabricio Moraes de Almeida Federal University of Rondonia, Brazil	Xiaohua Yang PhD, USA
Titus Pop	George - Calin SERITAN Postdoctoral Researcher	Nawab Ali Khan College of Business Administration

Editorial Board

Pratap Vyamktrao Naikwade ASP College Devrukh,Ratnagiri,MS India	Iresh Swami Ex - VC. Solapur University, Solapur	Rajendra Shendge Director, B.C.U.D. Solapur University, Solapur
R. R. Patil Head Geology Department Solapur University, Solapur	N.S. Dhaygude Ex. Prin. Dayanand College, Solapur	R. R. Yaliker Director Managment Institute, Solapur
Rama Bhosale Prin. and Jt. Director Higher Education, Panvel	Narendra Kadu Jt. Director Higher Education, Pune	Umesh Rajderkar Head Humanities & Social Science YCMOU, Nashik
Salve R. N. Department of Sociology, Shivaji University, Kolhapur	K. M. Bhandarkar Praful Patel College of Education, Gondia	S. R. Pandya Head Education Dept. Mumbai University, Mumbai
Govind P. Shinde Bharati Vidyapeeth School of Distance Education Center, Navi Mumbai	Sonal Singh Vikram University, Ujjain	Alka Darshan Shrivastava Shaskiya Snatkottar Mahavidyalaya, Dhar
Chakane Sanjay Dnyaneshwar Arts, Science & Commerce College, Indapur, Pune	G. P. Patankar S. D. M. Degree College, Honavar, Karnataka	Rahul Shriram Sudke Devi Ahilya Vishwavidyalaya, Indore
Awadhesh Kumar Shirotriya Secretary, Play India Play (Trust),Meerut	Maj. S. Bakhtiar Choudhary Director,Hyderabad AP India.	S.KANNAN Ph.D , Annamalai University,TN
	S.Parvathi Devi Ph.D.-University of Allahabad	Satish Kumar Kalhotra
	Sonal Singh	

**Address:-Ashok Yakkaldevi 258/34, Raviwar Peth, Solapur - 413 005 Maharashtra, India
Cell : 9595 359 435, Ph No: 02172372010 Email: ayisrj@yahoo.in Website: www.isrj.net**



GENDER IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

PRADIP KUMAR BEHERA

Lecturer in English,
S.K.C.G. (Auto) College, Paralakhemundi.

Abstract:

Chinua Achebe's first novel Things Fall Apart published in 1958 accounts for the experience of women within nationalist discourse. It shows how the dominant masculine nationalist tendencies are countered. It lays emphasis on women's concern. It describes the dual-sex institutions of Igboland which have shaped the identity of men and women in Igbo societies. Judith Van Allen mentions "Igbo Societies functioned according to a system of social organization that thrived on diffuse authority, fluid and informal leadership, shared rights of enforcement, and a more or less stable balance of male and female power". (171) The Igbo sociologist Kamene Okonjo has also argued that in both the "democratic village republics" and "constitutional village monarchy" systems of pre-colonial Igbo society, authority was so "dispersed" between the sexes that "each sex generally managed its own affairs and had its own kinship institutions".(47) Challenging what she considers a conventional stereotype on the identity of Igbo and Nigerian women, she contends that:

INTRODUCTION

...elsewhere men rule and dominate. Seeing this outwardly patriarchal framework, many observers concluded that the position of women in these societies was totally subordinate; as a result of their misconceptions, they produced a distorted picture of the 'oppressive' African man and the 'deprived' African woman. (45)

The Igbo historian Felix Ekechi also contends that the idea that "woman was seen as subordinate to the male" in traditional Igbo society is an "enduring stereotype of male-female relations which needs modification so as to reflect the African reality". (41) Explaining further how the Igbo communities with monarchical systems worked, Okonjo argues that there were two local monarchs:

Both of whom were crowned and acknowledged heads who lived in places and ruled from thrones. The two monarchs were the male obi, who in theory was the acknowledged head of the whole community but who in practice was concerned more with the male section of the community, and the female omu, who in theory was the acknowledged mother of the whole community but who in practice was charged with concern for the female section. (47)

OKONJO FURTHER MENTIONS:

Not only did "the dual nature of the system" ensure "a harmonious and effective division of labour by which both sexes would receive adequate attention to their need", the "male and female cabinets, despite

Title : GENDER IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART
Source: Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063]PRADIP KUMAR BEHERA yr:2013 vol:2 iss:8

their similarities in structure, were meant to ensure complementarities in their parallel functions".(48)

Social relations in Igboland were based on gender equality. "The Igbo sensibility", Achebe asserts, "has never been comfortable with anything so absolute and clear cut" as "Man is boss" (34). This statement has important implications for Achebe's writing because he upholds the system of "diffuse authority" in Igboland explicitly and insistently. He contends that "traditional Igbo societies laid emphasis on the decentralization of authority, and the distribution of power across a broad front in such a way that the possibility of a consensus to use authority oppressively against women was limited". (15)

Things Fall Apart represents gender relations as an integral part of Achebe's discourse of nationalism. Women play important roles in the regulation of law and order and in the dispensation of justice within an Igbo community before colonial rule. Evidence of this is provided, for instance, during the uri bridal ceremony that is performed for Obierika's daughter. At the point in the narrative when the women discover that one of Ezelagbo's "young children" had "opened the gate of the cow-shed" (Things Fall Apart, 82) and let loose a cow, they act to ensure law and order:

When they saw it they drove it back to its owner, who at once paid the heavy fine which the village imposed on anyone whose cow was let loose on his neighbours' crops. When the women had exacted the penalty they checked to see if any woman had failed to come out when the alarm was raised. (10-11)

This incident paints a vivid picture of the institutions of justice in traditional Igbo society. It confirms, as Van Allen argues, that "a man might be sanctioned ... for letting his cows eat the women's crops. The women would stay in his hut throughout the day, and late into the night, if necessary, until he repented and promised to mend his ways (169)". Such acts of women in pre-colonial Nigerian society are emblematic of the power inherent in the dual-sex structure of Igbo societies which allowed women to intervene and dispense justice through the act of 'sitting on a man'. Van Allen explains that:

'sitting on a man' or a woman, boycotts and strikes were the women's main weapons. To 'sit on' or 'make war on' a man involved gathering at his compound, sometimes late at night, dancing, singing scurrilous songs which detailed the women's grievances against him and often called his manhood into question, banging on his hut with the pestles women used for pounding yams, and perhaps demolishing his hut or plastering it with mud and roughing him up a bit. A man might be sanctioned in this way for mistreating his wife. (169)

This is suggestive of the images of women's solidarity along the lines described by Bolanle Awe, who contends that Igbo women before colonial rule "exploited the political strength of the traditional associations to emphasize the need for full consultation with them in any decision-making process". (ix)

Another example of the function of women's traditional associations is provided in Things Fall Apart when Amikwu, "the youngest of Uchendu's five sons", marries a new wife. At the "full gathering of the umuada" (95), which celebrates Amikwu's marriage, Njide, Uchendu's eldest daughter, leads the ceremony of absolution. What we have here is an instance of Okonjo's argument that:

Women in traditional Igbo society also held power through different social institutions. For example, they belonged to two villages – the one in which they were born and the one in which they married. In their natal villages, they were called umuada, or daughters of the lineage or village; in the village of their marriage they were inyemedi (co-wives). Both the inyemedi and the umuada performed important functions relating to the preservation of law and order in society. Traditionally, the leader of the umuada 'had the duty of providing the final absolution rites for a new bride'. (55)

Things Fall Apart offers a glimpse into social organization and the regulation of law and order in the Igbo past and the role that women played in these processes. The novel represents the importance of the contributions made by women to the running of society through group solidarity or "collective action".

The narratives of the novel demonstrate that the dual-sex institutions of Igboland with their provision for shared authority, co-existing leaderships and a stable balance of male and female power, were destroyed by the British. They mainly selected male Igbos and trained them as colonial functionaries. As Okonjo points out, "colonial rule in Nigeria in the first decade of twentieth century marked the beginning of the end of equality of the sexes". (55)

Instead of focusing solely on the conflict occasioned by colonialism, the domestic conflicts in which women are embroiled become central to the narration of the complex nature of Igbo societies. For instance, the exchange that takes place in Things Fall Apart between Okonkwo and his "senior wife" when the young lad Ikemefuna is first brought to the Umuofia clan and put under the tutelage of Okonkwo:

'He belongs to the clan', he told her, 'so look after him'. 'Is he staying long with us?' she asked. 'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. 'When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?' And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions. (10-11)

Okonkwo's manner would seem to prove that his wives and the women in his community are voiceless. However, Nwoye's mother eventually subverts Okonkwo's presumed authority over her and reduces him to a powerless figure within the clan.

At one level of the narrative, for instance, it seems obvious that Okonkwo “rules his household with a heavy hand” and that all his wives and children “live in perpetual fear” (9) of him. However, the narrative also problematizes the authority Okonkwo seeks to muster through his relationships with his wives and his children. The various relationships established between Okonkwo's wives and their children, and between them and Okonkwo also work to challenge Okonkwo's authoritative discourse. In one of his several moments of severe frustration, Okonkwo makes a confession to his friend Obierika:

I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yam can throw him in a wrestling match. His two younger brothers are more promising. But I can tell you, Obierika, that my children do not resemble me. Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies? If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit. (47)

Although Okonkwo narrates “stories of the land – masculine stories of bloodshed” to Nwoye and Ikemefuna, Nwoye still prefers the “foolish” stories of “women and children” (38) to those Okonkwo relates, only feigning “annoyance” and falsely grumbling “aloud about women and their troubles” and their stories (37). Okonkwo's contemplation of his unsuccessful attempts at masculinizing Nwoye and the latter's unwavering preference for what Okonkwo regards as “silly” “women's stories” (54), confers on Achebe's text a dialogic ambience. If stories as a means of socialization empower individuals within Umuofia to reject Okonkwo's misogyny and his violent and restrictive form of nationalism, the narrative also reveals the desire on the part of men like Unoka, Ikemefuna, and Nwoye for filiations with alternative constituencies of masculinity.

Okonkwo seems ignorant of the extent to which the culturalizing and socializing processes within Umuofia, and the formation of individual identity, do not depend upon the simple assertion of the forms of authority and the kinds of masculinity which he as a warrior articulates. They also involve the perhaps more exacting imaginative reinvention of identities through the medium of folk tales in order to reconfigure male and female identities as they are generally articulated within the culture. When Okonkwo finds in Nwoye's development a problematic identification with his mother and subsequently informs Obierika that Nwoye has too “much of his mother in him” (47), Okonkwo's misplaced certainties regarding his ability to transfer his masculine properties on to the upbringing of his children prevent him from realizing that Nwoye's preference for mother lore involves more than merely a facile adulation of “silly” women's stories, but is the consequence also of the ideological capability of women to control and dominate the production of particular modes of socialization. Okonkwo clearly lacks the strategies for mobilizing these particular forms of authority required both to initiate and fulfill this socializing process. Significantly, Nwoye's mother, under whose care Ikemefuna is put when he joins the clan, wields more authority over Nwoye than does Okonkwo. Despite the fact that in Okonkwo's estimation, it is Ikemefuna who helps transform Nwoye into his (Okonkwo's) idea of what it means to be a man, Ikemefuna and Nwoye identify themselves more with Nwoye's mother than with Okonkwo.

Nwoye's preference for his mother's tales and his obvious preference for her authority are set in direct opposition to Okonkwo's powerlessness in this regard. In Nwoye's mother, the narrative identifies a woman who manages to articulate an important position within the clan and thus assert her own identity partly through her nurturing role. This role also requires the instillation of attributes such as the “gentleness” and patience in the boys which Okonkwo consistently represses in his own psyche. Nwoye's mother, through some of the stories she relates, mobilizes all the resources at her disposal to ensure the boy's continued preference for her company and authority. Equipped with the authority of tradition, Nwoye's mother ensures that Okonkwo undergoes a paradoxical movement from a strong assured personality within the clan's warring traditions to a dislodged figure of contradiction within his own home. Okonkwo's masculinity thus assumes a fragile disposition, and it is interesting to further note the resonance between his own story and that of “Mosquito” and “Ear” which his mother tells him and which he so characteristically ignores. Okonkwo's efforts to ‘marry’ Ikemefuna and Nwoye to Umuofia's masculine nationalist traditions are repudiated in the fashion of Mosquito's unrequited marriage proposal to Ear; like Mosquito who constantly buzzes around Ear, Okonkwo incessantly haunts Nwoye with his stories of manliness without success. Okonkwo's weakening position very interestingly reminds us of the question Ear asks Mosquito: “How much longer do you think you will live?” “You are already a skeleton” (54).

Okonkwo's emasculation is a comment on male-female relationships and the extent to which, within the community as a whole, patriarchal domination may be subverted by maternal authority and control. Nwoye's mother dominates her household and radiates strong maternal instincts and it is her distinctive parental impulses which contribute largely to determining the formation of Nwoye's identity. Further, Okonkwo misconceives what he considers Ezinma's ‘misculine’ spirit, deriving from him. Ezinma's strength of character, which Okonkwo assumes to indicative of masculine properties, derives more from her internalization of the resilience of spirit and survival instincts of her embattled mother, Ekwefi. Ekwefi's experience with the agonizing ogbanje phenomenon which afflicts Ezinma is significant

in this respect.

By locating the struggle for voice, authority and power between men and women within a local context, Achebe is able to convey that conflicts in Igboland predated colonialism. He projects the evidence of women's struggles for power in the contest for authority with men, and questions the dominant assumption that the struggle for power can only be articulated at the public political level of the conflicts initiated by colonialism. This same historicist imperative challenge Obierika's claim that the Umuofia "clan can no longer act like one" and has "fallen apart" (127) because of the presence of the white man in Igboland. Other reasons are suggested by the story of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* for the inability of the clan to act as one. At the very least, there is the conflict between women and men. Joseph Therese Agbasiere has argued that the main aim of *Things Fall Apart* was not only to depict the antiquity of Igbo tradition, but also to demonstrate "that the Igbo tradition existed long before the advent of Christianity or colonial rule" (2). So what Achebe wanted to illustrate that this tradition had its own internal conflict and divisions but was very dynamic and abiding.

Even as he produced his reconstructive fictions on African culture and society as part of the culture-clash theme, Achebe was equally interested in representing issues central to the internal dynamics of Igbo society. His narrative postulates alternative traditions of nationalism, resistance, and cultural identity. These traditions contest the domineering masculinity and aggressive deportment of Okonkwo, who seems to coerce his son, Nwoye, and the young lad, Ikemefuna, into embracing a specific form of tradition by encouraging them "to sit with him in his obi" so that he can tell "them stories of land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (37). A problematic relationship is established between Okonkwo and his household and also his community, which unfolds the complexity of identity and identity-formations in domestic, societal and national contexts of the pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. In the unfolding of this complex discourse, *Things Fall Apart* does represent the power that women traditionally had before the colonial legislation proscribed it through Native Administration acts; and portrays the contradictions of these lived experiences as revealing representational paradoxes captured in an excellent artistic frame.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe Chinua, *Things Fall Apart*, London: Heinemann, 1958.
- _____, "Achebe Answering Questions", *Travelling : Chinua Achebe in Scandinavia*, Swedish Writers in Africa, Raoul Granqvist ed., Umea, Umea University, 1990, 34.
- Ibid., p.15.
- Agbasiere Joseph Therese, *Women in Igbo Life and Thought*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000, 2.
- Allen Judith Van, "Sitting on a Man", *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, Nancy J.Hafkin and Edna.G ed., Standford, California, Stanford University Press, 1976, 171.
- Ibid, p.169.
- Awe Bolanle, "Introduction", *Women and Politics in Nigeria*, J.A.A. Ayoade, Elone J. Nwabuzor and Adesina Sambo Ed., Lagos, Malthouse Press for Centre of Democratic Studies, 1992, ix.
- Ekechi Felix K., "Gender and Economic Power : The Case of Igbo Market Women of Eastern Nigeria", *African Market Women and Economic Power: The Role of Women in African Economic Development*, Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K.Ekechi ed., Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1995, 41.
- Okonjo Kamene, "The Dual-Sex Political System", *Women in Africa*, Hafkin and Bay ed. 47.
- Ibid., p.48.
- Ibid., p.45.
- Ibid., p.55.



PRADIP KUMAR BEHERA,
LECTURER IN ENGLISH,S.K.C.G. (AUTO) COLEGE,PARALAKHEM-
UNDI,GAJAPATI, ODISHA.

Publish Research Article International Level Multidisciplinary Research Journal For All Subjects

Dear Sir/Mam,

We invite unpublished research paper.Summary of Research Project,Theses,Books and Books Review of publication,you will be pleased to know that our journals are

Associated and Indexed,India

- * International Scientific Journal Consortium Scientific
- * OPEN J-GATE

Associated and Indexed,USA

- EBSCO
- Index Copernicus
- Publication Index
- Academic Journal Database
- Contemporary Research Index
- Academic Paper Databse
- Digital Journals Database
- Current Index to Scholarly Journals
- Elite Scientific Journal Archive
- Directory Of Academic Resources
- Scholar Journal Index
- Recent Science Index
- Scientific Resources Database

Golden Research Thoughts
258/34 Raviwar Peth Solapur-413005,Maharashtra
Contact-9595359435
E-Mail-ayisrj@yahoo.in/ayisrj2011@gmail.com
Website : www.isrj.net