

The Feminist Side of Chinua Achebe: A Re-Reading of *Things Fall Apart*

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Introduction

Of all the writings of Chinua Achebe or on a narrower sense of all his novels, *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) is the most read, the most acclaimed (having been translated into several languages of the world) and the most critiqued; yet the end to debates and counter-debates on the work is not in sight. Earlier discussions on TFA pointed out its tradito-cultural implications and then its feministic implicatures. Language and style, especially as they relate to the proverbial perspective of the novel, have received considerable attention. In some cases recent discourses have described Achebe as "high-handed" in the handling of his female characters as exemplified by Okonkwo whose role is crucial or central to the development of the story, and whose major actions in are propelled by his fear of being seen as a feminist or being described as a "woman-wrapper", if we put it in typical Nigerian slang. Critics say Achebe's female characters are generally subjugated, symbolic, and supportive. But in this paper, we argue that down in his heart Achebe is not a cruel man (TFA: 9). Rather his whole life has been dominated with a restless desire to see Africa in all her ramification represented and represented well. This paper therefore discusses the feministic side of Achebe; bearing in mind, the existing and evolving feministic discourse models. The theoretical frame on which the present discussion is underpinned can be assumed: a divergent one, to say the least; but such as accommodate the re-reading of TFA. Though Achebe is inexcusable in the matter of inequity as far as his female characters are concerned, the position of this paper is that in TFA, Achebe is not just a chronicler of trado-cultural artefacts but one who presents the woman as a "restraining force on male presumption and aggression" (Bicknell 271) thereby establishing a balance between the male and female. The fact that Achebe's women in TFA do not say much, does not imply that they are "passive"; in most cases they act independently and radically too as they exert (considerable measure of) "control in their homes, community" and even in the life of their men". Take the case of Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, who damned the night and the curse by the Priestess as she "disappeared into the darkness" and followed the Priestess a long and weary journey traversing nine villages in one night; while the man Okonkwo, went for his snuff, made futile attempts to catch up with the trio. The distance covered by these two women, especially the Priestess doing the distance at great speed with a child on her back; does not portray a supportive role. This is more than a mythological or symbolic representation of the woman. It should be recalled that the purpose of the Priestess' visit to Okonkwo's compound was to secure the life of Ezinma, whose health had been of great distress to her mother; this same female child whom Okonkwo had copiously wished had been a having been let down by his father Unoka and his first son, Nwoye.

It is not clear when critics described (if they have done so at all) Achebe as treating the role of men as realistic but women symbolically. The question that comes to mind is what would really be more realistic a role as the display of chivalry by Ekwefi who defied darkness and curses to trail the Priestess all night compared to her husband who found solace in his snuff-box? The resilience of Ekwefi is unmatched as she defies the curses and dangers of the night; compared to a fearless warrior who made fruitless trips to the shrine under the pretest of manliness, as he waited for the outcome of the battle of the life of his Ezinma who he repeatedly wished had been a boy. A man, who is not afraid of blood, succumbs to the voracious love of a radical woman who took her destiny into her hands as she went after the love of her heart. Again all that the man Okonkwo could do was to open the door and search for the loose end of her wrapper. Only a woman (Ekwefi) could bang on the fearless warrior's door. Only a woman could challenge Okonkwo, screaming a warning at him. Achebe's female characters in general are certainly neither silent nor supportive. It cannot be said that anyone of them displayed snail-sense in the navigation of life; not even the girls. They do not hesitate to talk back at their brothers.

Though nameless and not "one of the *ndichie*" of Umuofia clan; Okonkwo's first wife wielded an incredible power/authority and control over the household of a man who was "not afraid of war a man of war" (7), as the author describes him. Nwoye's mother was a woman who could balance the power of "the proud and imperious emissary of war" (9). She was a woman who could calm the nerves of a man whose whole life was dominated by morbid fear. She could be trusted by the clan (a feared clan at that) and so given the custody of the ransom (Ikemefuna) for three years. "He belongs to the clan", her husband intimates her; "so look after him" (10). Obviously, this was not a mere feat. It cannot also be said that Nwoye's mother displayed less power in this regard. Her strength of character kept the "ransom" safe until he was for sacrifice. The mothering side of Nwoye's mother is evident in the lie she told "to minimise Ojiugo's thoughtlessness"(21) and ensure harmony in the compound. It was she, not Okonkwo, who held the compound together by her influence. Okonkwo could not display the same composure until he had desecrated the land by a wanton display of anger and irresponsibility. He fouled the earth and dishonoured the "great goddess" of the earth, thus exposing the clan to ruin. The stupendous power of this goddess is further affirmed by Obierika thus: "It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (46). It should be mentioned at this point and perhaps subsequently that inferiorization theory held by some of Achebe's depiction of his female characters deserves another consideration. For instance, Nwoye's mother does not necessarily have to be one of the *Ndichie* of Umuofia clan; but her competence, sense of judgement and control over the home of an irate man (who thrice violated womanhood and thrice received a just reprimand but nonetheless was custodied by a woman) cannot be underrated. After all Okonkwo was not the highest titled man in the village nor was he the leader of Umuofia; but his first wife was given a man's task. Women may be taciturn or assume to be so, but Ezeigbo says they employ their mouth and doggedness to navigate tough terrains. The conspiracy of silence displayed by women, (during the court session involving Mgbafo and her husband) over the identity of an Ekwugwu was the sense of trust, respect and pride they shared in humanhood and shared culture as a community. So their silence (often misconstrued) becomes more ominous than ranting and in so doing they protect their bond or sisterhood as the case may be and also keep the identity of the man.

Achebe further shows that women do not only exert control in their homes, but in the community. A good instance is their ability to drive a loose cow back to its owner and exact a heavy penalty from him. In this and other contexts are also seen bonding, sisterhood solidarity and unity. An example worth citing here was during Obierika's daughter's marriage. Twice in the text, a woman's socio-political powers to hold Umuofia to ransom were displayed. First it was the death of Ogbuefi's wife which led to the sacrificial offering of a male, Next was the incidence between Mgbafo and Uzowulu her husband. Although the case did not receive a just attention; the ruling was that a re-occurrence of the ugly situation will earn Uzowulu the loss of his "genitals" (65). When man lacks the boldness to confront issues objectively, like addressing Unoka's laziness; it was a priestess' scream; "her voice terrible as it echoed through the dark void" that drove sense into the head of the "Efulufu called Unoka commanding him to "go home and work like a man" (13).

To further buttress the point so far made and perhaps debunk the argument that Achebe is anti- women and for that reason he portrays them as having less power than they do in reality. reference is made to the active principle in the war medicine that puts Umuofia above all its neighbours. One imagines the overawing power rested on "an old woman with one leg"; this mythical being is called "agadinwayi (9) and highly revered as she will never "fight a war of blame" (9). Even the economic powers of the people of Umuofia rested "in the shape of an old woman with a fan" (79). Achebe may be said to de-personalise women; but he did not fail to recognise imposing figures such as Anasi. Achebe describes her as "tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the women-folk...." (14), and shared the insignia of equality and leadership with her husband. In this circumstance, it cannot be said that social control rested entirely on preternatural beings. Anasi's sense of solidarity with the other eight wives and thirty children in one family; and her political ambience are beyond motherhood or co-mothering. She is defined not just by association but by who she is: an "authority" and a "ruler", a woman of excellent carriage; the model of an assertive woman; same as Ekwefi and Chinelo.

Certainly the portrayal of these women and others is neither negative nor inferiorizing of the women. Flora Nwapa cited in Nnolim (198) says "radical feminism means breaking all known society's mores and elegant decorum". Is this not the case with Ekwefi and Chinelo within the African context? Who could be so audacious as to bang on the door of the fearless warrior or scream "Beware" at him? In all the instances of failed harvest, no mention was made of "women's crops" implying the resilience and doggedness of the woman and her unequalled strength to keep hope and life active. These attributes of the woman Achebe metaphorically evoked through agricultural imagery.

In his depiction of his female characters in some form of negative light, Achebe did not spare the men. The society whose native life was mirrored had to be "authentic" even within the ambience of fiction. Rather than rivalry and hostility; the identity of the woman portrayed in TFA is bonding, solidarity and sisterhood. This identity is witnessed not only in Obierika and Okonkwo's compound, but in Umuofia and Mbanta. Even among the young and up-coming. Achebe's conception of womanhood extends to include for instance, the female consciousness and bonding that existed between Ezinma and Obiageli from childhood. Ezinma will not succumb to pressure until they get back to Umuofia. Her influence on Obiageli, is an old age tradition that African women are not strange to. Sisterhood or bonding to give one another support in Africa predates all feminist ideologies or theories. Furthermore, feminist

consciousness is a practice noticed even from childhood. Although goaded by her father, Eze, she would say, to decline marriage proposals from Mhants, Ezinma's feminist consciousness is evident in her ability to take a stand and even influence her half-sister to do same. Her refusal is not patriarchal domination but a case of a feminine gender bestowing honour and dignity on a male whose senior son had deserted him: a male whose father had earlier on shamed and deserted, a male whose "ch" had failed. The power of the woman comes out strong in Ezinma (the good woman mother). Such is the dignity she bestows on the male-father that Okonkwo began to "live" again as he looked forward to the materialisation of this dignity on his return to Umuofia. He was determined to regain the lost years on a grand style. This included the attraction his two beautiful daughters will accord him; especially Crystal of Beauty. So it was the female not the boys who bestowed honour and dignity on Okonkwo by their corporate resolve and chastity.

Bicknell (265) opines also that in TFA "exchanges of political and philosophical ideas take place exclusively among the men", somehow she fails to recognise the deep mythological and psychological powers of the woman as far as all the realms of life are concerned. A few instances are the mythological *agadi-nwayi* who assures Umuofia of victories in battle or the one-legged woman who ensures economic success or even the psychological control Ezinma had on her father: "she understood things so perfectly. Who else among his children could have read his thought so well?" (122). Even if it was not politically motivated, the female-bonding in TFA is worth applauding, including the symbolic mothering role played by Mbanta. Compare this solidarity with the men who could not defend or support their kind. It had to do with the invasion of Mbanta by the white. Reacting to this intrusion at an all-male meeting, Okonkwo said: "Let us not reason like cowards.... If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor.... Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does" (113).

Unfortunately he did not have his listeners' support. On returning to Umuofia, Okonkwo is confronted with a similar situation and this is what rather than solidarity/male-bonding. Obierika reports: "How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us?" (124). Furthermore, "there were many men... in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation." (126), not even his return received special notice, because the men had broken up: "the men... found no words to speak to one another" (138). We see more cases of men brutalizing and deserting men than fraternizing with fellow men. And so Okonkwo decides to leave them and plan his own revenge. "I shall fight alone" (142), he says. He did and when he turned around all that he heard were voices asking "Why did he do it?" (145). Sensing the lack of political will and solidarity, Okonkwo commits the incalculable offence; dying as an unsung and unmourned entity. Not so with Achebe's women in the text: who in the face of external and internal threats, bonded. Even Chinelo, the "implacable spokesperson of the will of the gods"; in her hours of exorcism, will not curse Ekwefi.

Finally, Achebe had to remind his readers and "accusers" that mother is supreme. The Yoruba will say mother is gold and the *Ibibio* call her 'inunafere' (the salt that preserves/sweetens the soup). An extensive narration is offered by Achebe to affirm his unreserved acknowledgement of the woman as supreme. In the midst of chronicling *Igbo* native life and times, Achebe has faithfully, artistically and graphically shown that women are not as supportive/subjugated, inferiorated as many critics have accused him of portraying them to be. He has actually shown

that in many instances women occupy prime positions in the traditional society as well as modern. They high positions even in the minds of the men; to the extent that "fearless" men drew strength from the woman, and victory in war was assured by a woman's approval. Whether realistically, mythologically, symbolically, metaphorically evoked; it is obvious that in TFA. Achebe has shown his feministic side; and that in many strands. Even the proverb of the people confirms the leadership role of the woman thus "when mother-cow is chewing grass (49) its calf watches its mouth. The radical Ekwefi will not only marry the man of her choice but "had the audacity to bang on his door" (53) at night; Okonkwo's growling notwithstanding. She trivialised the capacity of his dane gun and even killed her fowl by herself without waiting for the man. The tremendous power of the female is expressed by Obierika who says she is capable of wiping out whole families. Ezinma knew who she was: a woman of influence and authority and earned the name "Ezigbo". She influenced her father, mother, step-mother, Agbala/Chinelo and even her step-sister Obiageli. She is a Crystal indeed.

Re-iterating Manfred Printz's view of Anthill of the Savannah, it can be said that anyone who fails to notice the central import of women; their political, economic, social, "symbolic or mythological" significance in the life and times of the Igbo people in TFA, has failed to notice or understand an African's strong inclination to the female gender, recalling the endearing and superlative names by which they are called and also bearing in mind that some African are matriarchal in their set up. Any critic who therefore fails to notice that women are "more important characters" in TFA than men "largely because of the 'symbolic or mythological resonance of their import needs to re-read the novel vis-a-vis the society, the tradition and the African concept of feminism". From the beginning of the novel (TFA) to the end, the mention of the women is not in want. Each reference to the female gender; adult or young, as a mythological or symbolic being, each carries with it a sense of socio-cultural, economic, political importance. It is our view that a re- reading of the novel, in the spirit of female-bonding, solidarity, sisterhood, mothering foreshadows or unravels emerging issues of feministic interest leading to the question posed in this paper. It is also interesting to note that the spirit of the female bonding has foregrounding implications that seem to suggest that Achebe "may not be as traditional" as he is presumed or anti-women/anti-female gender as he is usually labelled. There are men who have a strong feminist inclination within the literary circle. Besides Achebe, J.P. Clark is one of them. To a large extent therefore it can be said that TFA is a female story told by a man. The novel is dominated, not necessarily populated (this is not important) by female characters of exceptional disposition like Ezinma, Ekwefi, Nwoye's mother, Chinelo, Agadi-nwayi, Anasi.

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