



Silencing the Subaltern: Representation of Women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This paper studies the roles of women characters in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to explore the position and challenges of women in Nigerian society. Through an analysis of female characters, the study reveals how women are marginalized and denied the freedom to express themselves. When Ekwefi, the wife of Okonkwo, disagrees with the decision to slaughter only one goat instead of two for a feast, her opinion is harshly dismissed, and she is forcefully silenced by her husband. To analyse such problems of women, the paper draws on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, particularly her question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It also employs Simon de Beauvoir's concept of women as "the Other" to strengthen the research argument. The paper argues that women in Nigerian culture are subjected to severe patriarchal suppression. Whenever they attempt to voice their opinions, they are frequently ignored, ridiculed, or silenced by men. In addition to patriarchal domination, economic deprivation further restricts their ability to speak and assert themselves. As a result, they remain unable to cross the rigid boundaries imposed by masculinity. The

paper concludes that the women characters in the novel are oppressed through practices of silencing, ignoring, ridiculing, and commodifying. Since the novel reflects the realities of Nigerian society, this condition represents a subaltern state in which women are denied agency and voice. The study suggests that women can achieve empowerment only by resisting such oppression and speaking for themselves.

Keywords: Commodifying, economic deprivation, double silencing, ignoring, ridiculing, subaltern women

Introduction

The novel *Things Fall Apart* was written by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe and was published in 1958. It sketches a vivid picture of pure Nigerian Igbo society and how the pure cultural society has been contaminated by the colonial presence and the whole system is disturbed. The meaning of the novel's title also lies here that the central command of the Nigerian native culture of Igbo community has been scattered by the colonial attack over their purity of culture, social construction and command. The novel is an example of

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sketching the Nigerian culture and its purity as Achebe seems conscious for protecting and conserving the cultural properties like life style, god and goddess, proverbs and folk stories which were popular in the country. Okankwo is presented as a strong and conscious Nigerian male for command over culture and people. Ezinma, Ekwefi, and Nwoye's mother are the major women characters who are mostly suppressed by the male characters in the novel. The women's position, voice, experience is highly suppressed by the masculinity. Masculinity in the novel is pictured as leadership, warier and power whereas femininity is presented as silent, obedient and under domesticity. Though the women play main role in house management, rearing animal and farm production, their contribution is always ignored by the whole social system. The nature of Okankwo is not different from this and he is crueller and more suppressive over his three wives. Ekwiefi rears goats but she is not heard while slaughtering it in a feast.

This article examines the position of women in Nigerian culture and how they are silenced as subaltern women as described in the novel. The novel and the women's condition is studied through the theoretical insights of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and Simon de Beauvoir's concept of *The Second Sex* (1949). Spivak argues that the women are the marginalized subaltern and they are doubly suppressed, subjugated and prevented to speak their voice. Male hegemony ignores, erases and silences the female voices. Beauvoir on the other hand indicates the women as relational to man and they are the other part of them. Women are always haunted as other and the position of women characters in the novel is not different from that condition.

Methodology

This study is a critical textual analysis on the qualitative data collected from the book *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe.

The women related textual information is collected by the close reading of the text and the collected information are the primary source for analysis and interpretation. Theoretical ideas related to feminism, post colonialism and subaltern studies are used to interpret the primary data collected from the text. Through close reading of the women's role, position, and representation of women in Igbo community, this study analyses them from Spivak's perspective of subaltern and Beauvoir's concept of the Other. Male and female characters, their social and economic position and how their voices are silenced by the males are studied and analysed in this article.

Review of Literature

Since the publication of the novel *Things Fall Apart* it has got an extensive reading and responses. Generally, the novel is studied and analysed from the perspective of colonialism and cultural hegemony of the white people over the Nigerian blacks. It is considered as a political novel as the white people have played imperial politics over the natives in Nigeria. In this connection Rohit Baral writes; "Political reasons like imperialism, colonialism, and war are the major factors for environmental degradation which is projected in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, the activity of the white people gradually destroyed the natural and cultural integrity and intimacy of the natives" (115). Colonialism and imperialism is the main reason of natural degradation. Massive deforestation and exploitation over natural resources is documented in the novel. Anju Tamrakar has studied the novel as a collection of Nigerian proverbs and it is the aesthetic of the native culture of Igbo people with the beauty of proverbs. She writes, "the novel *Things Fall Apart* has a beautiful and grand collection of Nigerian proverbs in the context. The book is an example for the collection of proverbs in the cultural context" (41). Her study is the comparison between Nepali and Nigerian proverbs

which add the aesthetic in the native culture and this sort of collection of proverbs in a novel is very important for modern readers. Linda Strong- Leek studied the novel from women's perspective. Her argument is that the male characters in the novel are affected by the women characters. She writes, "the women character's life is not only affected by their father/ husband but also women who affect their husband/ father" (33). Her focus is on the role of women and male characters as correlative characters. The novel is a documentation of African tradition, culture and history as concluded by Godwin Kwadwo Osei-Nyame "Reading the "other side" of Achebe's Igbo-African nationalist tradition means alternating the narrative viewpoint to radically transform the story and its underlying assumptions" (155). The whole novel is the narrative of Igbo-African tradition. The text is a vivid record of the native Igbo culture as such. These research still leave the research gap that the novel can be studied and analysed from the perspective of women's forceful silencing by the male members of the community. It is worth studying area that the women are the subaltern group and they cannot and are not allowed to speak inside and outside the home.

Women as Subaltern and the Other

Since the birth, a woman is always under the grip of exploitation, suppression and silencing through various tools of culture, economy, gender, sex, marriage, maternity and others. There are some procedures to silence women like ignoring, ridiculing and shouting over them. They are the victims at many times and places. It is vividly portrayed over women characters in the novel. They are made the others and subaltern as claimed by Gayatri Spivak. In her argument, the poor, peasants, colonized and the women are the subaltern. Spivak makes the doubt and calls the subaltern to speak in her popular essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" According to her, the women are

doubly silenced as they are under patriarchy and the suppression of poverty. The poor and the women cannot speak. She writes, "Within the affected itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly affected" (524). She clearly states here that the women are the subaltern, and they are under discrimination, silencing and oppression doubly by masculinity and economic deprivation. Lack of economic independence is the major factor of silencing others because poor cannot speak as their voice is always suppressed and ignored by the rich. The women in Nigeria are silenced doubly as exposed in the text and this issue is discussed in the discussion section of this paper.

The women are made different counting their sexuality and they are silenced because they can do nothing as they are dependent with the males to survive. Women labour and voice are ignored, not paid, or lowly paid in many contexts. They cannot raise voice over this exploitation and suppression. Spivak again states, "The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rule of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is evidence, the ideological construction of gender keeps the males dominant" (524). Gender roles construct the ideology about males as powerful, strong and dominating whereas the women as dominated and weak. There are certain gender defined works only for women like cooking and washing which are only allocated for women and the works are ignored, unpaid or low paid. They are not allowed to raise any voice against domination as they are exploited and suppressed.

Womanhood is an ideology too. It is a matter of identity, autonomy and individuation. It is made silenced by the patriarchy and construction of so-called gender roles. The women gender is given certain assisting and subordinating roles only by creating gender discrimination. The "casual female labour" (525) in

Spivak's term which is not the major but a casual, a second and without any sound. In this reference she further argues, "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (524). Women are under domination, colonized, without history, cannot speak, under shadow and the subaltern. Their voice is in deep shadow under masculinity, classism, by culture, history and subalterns.

The issue of gender and sex has been an issue of academic discussion during and after nineteenth century. The history of women is always in shadow of the male counterparts. Mary Wollstonecraft first opened the academic discussion about women's rights and identity. In her view, a child is not born with the consciousness of sex and gender, but circumstances like family, society and culture grow up him/her as a son or a daughter. She argues that 'Sex' is biological and bodily structure by birth whereas gender is a construct. Women are culturally, socially, and biologically subjugated, out casted, marginalized and exploited from the main stream social system. They are identified as beautiful, emotional and delicate whereas her male counterparts are presented as strong, smart and bold. Wollstonecraft writes, "Everything that they see or hear serves to fit impressions, call forth emotions, and associate ideas that give a sexual character to the mind" (395). Outer surroundings of seeing, hearing and experiencing construct the mind of sexuality. She argues, "Women are only subjugated by ignorance to their sensation and only taught to look for happiness in love and refine in sensual feeling" (398). Women are made ignorant by male subjugation. They are only for sensation, love making and happiness for the males in life. These were the general understandings and notions for female as Wollstonecraft indicates. As a female right

activist, Matilde Martin Gonzalez writes about Wollstonecraft, "Wollstonecraft encourages women to speak, to use their intellectual energy and warns against the allure of romantic love and beauty" (179). She suggests that women are culturally allured by the males as beautiful gifts of love or nymphs. The intellectual beauty of the women is paralysed by the so-called physical beauty, and they are also being trapped on it. This measurement of women's beauty is also a way of making them entice and ignore.

Women's beauty is a tool for man to silence and exploit the women. In the name of beauty, the males put them inside the cage of love and family bondage. Gonzalez states, "Wollstonecraft obviously deserves the craft for having been the first woman thinker in posing the issue of women's subordination in terms of gender" (180). This subordinating of women is the main strategy by the males to silence and ignore the women. She has opened the issue of women right as a category of study and analysis in academics. The identity and gender roles determined by culture and history have prevented them from being rational. Their role is always defined and determined by the males and they are compelled to follow their orders. They are forced not to speak, not to raise head up, remain cool and passive, and are generally ignored from any decision-making roles. They are given inferior and supporting roles to the males. Men are instructed to be strong, to speak, to decide, and to do adventurous roles. The socially and culturally defined roles have victimized the women. In this context, Gonzalez further writes, "The configuration of women's sexuality as the negative Other to men's rationality is one of the elements that makes possible patriarchal victimization of women in our society" (179). This historically constructed and determined gender role of women is figured as the other, silence, second, inferior, and many more secondary names.

The discourse of female identity and position in the 20th century was largely shaped by males for a long time in human history. The males have been defined as 'the self' and the women as 'the others' the binaries. Simon de Beauvoir marked it as he is the one she is the other. Beauvoir, continuing the concept of Wollstonecraft and the binary of structuralisms, talked about the female position. She argues that women are made and portrayed as 'the others' with feminine qualities and males as 'the self' with masculine qualities. About female and their right, she argues, "feminism is a part of a larger project of social injustice and human right" (Beauvoir 849). Masculinity is considered as the standard human type (he is the one) when feminine is inferior, lacks something, and others (she is the other). She further writes, "Sex is not the same thing as gender. Thus, women's status under the patriarchy is the other" (849). It is the historical construct of feminine identity that women lack so many standard qualities from the males. Habib giving reference to Beauvoir writes, "De Beauvoir quotes Aristotle as saying that the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (683). The males are with every quality and the women are the secondary, lack many, so they are made 'the others'. This othering of women is to ignore, silence and exploit them.

The women are different from males with their body structures and some gender roles like motherhood, family responsibilities and their emotions. This difference with the males makes them the second and the other. Habib further writes, "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought as primordial as consciousness itself. Consciousness always entails positing a duality of Self and Others" (683). These all identities of women as 'other' and 'second' are the male generated myths about women to exploit and silence them. It is the historical myth that males have risk-taking, decision making, speaking

and adventurous characters whereas women lack these qualities. This very myth has prepared males at the mercy of natural forces and women lack all the qualities. This historical discourse of male and female identity has made the men as speaking 'self' and the female as silencing 'other', strong males and weak females, risk-taking males and supporting female.

Biological role, social duties and gender performance determine the gender role though manhood and womanhood which are cultural and social construct. In this reference Simon de Beauvoir writes, "one is not born but rather is made a woman" (301). When she is made a woman then begins exploitation and subjugation. The set of acts keep them always under pressure of exploitation and oppression. Judith Butler in this context writes, "to become a woman is a purposive and appropriative set of acts" (36). The different set of acts inside the kitchen and home keep the women under their voice. Patriarchy on the other hand is a tool to exploit and oppress them. Monique Wittig writes, "Matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy; it is only the sex of the oppressor that changes" (104). The strong patriarchy according to her is only for severe exploitation of the females in various ways.

Exploitation is a most painful condition in which most of the females fall on in the past. But the situation has undergone changed in many contexts and places. The exploitation over women is mainly for biological and economic condition of them. The maternity duty of women to be pregnant and mother creates a condition of exploitation over them. Jalana Hanmer in this context writes, "Children, childbearing, marriage, capitalism, the family, and the man were dominant factors of exploitation" (444). The overall social, economic and cultural conditions are the conditions which help the males to exploit and marginalize women. In another context Rohana Ariffin writes, "women are exploited mostly by the

economic and job factor as they are largely employed at the bottom of the official and educational hierarchy both in public and private sector” (151). This suggests that the workplace is favourable place for exploiting women in the world financially and socially. Marilyn Power Goldberg also indicates the similar condition of exploitation that, “creating division in work force, low wage and limit the power of labour, labour hierarchy, and difference in working condition so hierarchy is created between males and female workers” (35). These are some factors and conditions of silencing and exploitation of women in various nations, cultures and societies.

Marginalization of Women in *Things Fall Apart*

In the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the main character Okonkwo has the similar masculine characteristics as explained by Beauvoir and Wollstonecraft. Okonkwo owns every masculine quality like warrior-like, strong, risk taking, decision making, adventurous and never surrendering. He has three wives, and is the head in the family as well as an owner of all property. He proves himself as a strong wrestler and makes every decision in the family and in his clan. He always has the fear that whether he will develop some feminine quality or the fear of failure. He is always conscious throughout the novel for his hyper masculinity and fear for feminine qualities. He even wants his son and other boys to be like men, not like the women. He tells them stories of bravery and adventure to train them like the real masculine man. It is said in the novel, “So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi*, and told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent” (50). The boys are grown up with the training like to be boys and the daughters with feminine qualities.

Achebe seems to be so conscious for

presenting the characters in the novel as they represent the Nigerian people, culture and life. Okonkwo is a strong male character who banishes every womanly quality. He says telling stories, loving music and showing affection are womanly qualities and he seems conscious to avoid these qualities. It is said in the novel, “And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women’s stories” (51) and “when he was a child his mother told him a story about it. But it was a silly as all women’s stories” (71). Playing music, dancing, telling and listening stories, using cosmetics are the major feminine characters for which the Nigerian males are conscious. Okonkwo is more conscious in this matter and saves himself from such activities. He hates his father’s love towards music which he believes as a feminine character. He loves his daughter Ezinma very much, but does not show any affection towards her because it is women’s job to weep, showing affection, remaining silent, singing and dancing. He seems to be cruel though he loves her with emotions. Showing cruelty, speaking hoarse and shouting are the masculine characters for which Okonkwo is conscious. For his lovely daughter too, he wishes for being son. He says, “I wish she were a boy” (163) and “If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been a happier” (62). Such wishes of Okonkwo are described elsewhere in the novel where he is trying to search masculine qualities in his daughter and he is worried for feminine qualities in his son Nwoye, who has his grandfather’s habit of loving music, stories and dance, the feminine qualities. The argument here is that the sons are made as sons and daughters as daughters by the family and society where they grow up though they do not grow with the consciousness of sex and gender roles. They are grown up according to their tribe, culture, religion in which the traditional gender roles are described and determined, and in most culture, the women are inferiorly pictured.

The women in the novel are depicted as

'the other' in such a way that they are not given any major and decision-making roles. Every decision is made by the males. In the novel, Okonkwa makes every decision in the family. The Nigerian society has a proverb that "a man says yes his chi says yes also" (26). Chi is the personal god for the clan and they celebrate the god very much. This means that man is the decision maker with the help of Chi god but not with his female friend or the life partner. In every decision woman is made the other. There is not the space for women; if they protest, they are threatened. In the novel, when Okonkwa's wife gives her arguments, she is ignored completely. In the novel it is said "Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife Ekwefi protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast he told her that it was not her affair" (155). There is not any right of wife in decision-making. The complete authority is with the male/husband but not with the halves/wife. Women in the Nigerian culture and society are completely like the outsiders as described. In the cultural functions, the women are treated like the workers and labourers, but not as the important part of the function. In a cultural ceremony, "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for man. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (83). It is the clear picture in the in Nigerian society that the self is the man and women are 'the other' and 'second' as said by Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*.

African or Nigerian society seems to be very cruel to women. They are not only out casted from the main stream socio-cultural roles, they are also exploited physically, economically and culturally. The males seem to be cruel to their wives. A male is free to have many wives as if they are the assets of the males. Women are like the things or object to buy and borrow for the males. They are the commodities better to consume for the males. In Igbo community

a male can collect woman in terms of his property and agricultural production like yam. A character in the novel Odukwue says, "That woman standing there is my wife Mabafo. I married her with my money and my yams" (86). This claim of Odukwue objectifies a woman, his wife and claims that she is like a thing to be purchased and consumed. She is metaphorically compared with the economic means like yams, and she can be purchased if a male has enough objects like yams, the main crop of the place. Those who own more yams can own more women, and both are for male consumption.

Another way of silencing women is shouting, ignoring and beating them. They are beaten violently, and they survive by chance. Males think beating wives is their bravery and masculinity. Okonkwo tells the boys and his son masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent (50). In the instruction, he teaches that masculinity and violence are the synonymous characters of males and this violence is mainly against the women, the wives. Being male is inherently owning the right to be violent over the women. Another example of cruelty to women says; "When she was pregnant, he beat her until she was miscarried. Last year when my sister was recovering from an illness, he beat her again so that the neighbours had not gone in to save her she would have been killed" (87). Beating and assault are inhumane practices that frequently appear in the novel as forms of violence against women. These are some of the examples which show and prove that women are extremely exploited by their husbands. There is no humanity or humane behaviour, but rather animalistic behaviour toward them. One of the white priests in the condition of racial conflict between the church and the native clan says; "Go and burn your mothers' genital" (146). This is an extreme example which shows that the religion is also cruel to the women in Nigeria.

Property factor is another means of exploitation of women in the novel. The novel tells the story of the agricultural villages in Nigeria. Yams, maize, beans are the major agricultural products. The women mainly work in the farms and produce these products but they cannot be the owner of the products (Lisanza, 86). Men own them and take pride in treating them as their possessions. The women are not even allowed to enter into the store. It is said in the novel, "These women never saw the inside of the hut" (84). This is the indication that how the women are outcasted and deprived from the property and matter. Uzowulu one of the male character claims that; "I married her with my money and my yams. I do not owe my in-laws anything. I owe them no yams. I owe them no coco-yams" (86). It is supposed that the women are like the objects or like animals to buy with property like money and yams. When they are bought like animals or objects, then exploitation is inevitable. So, object or material property is another means to exploit, suppress and dominate the women. Lisanza further indicates about the role of women and writes that they are the entertainers in the society. They need to sing songs, dance and celebrate during male events. The players are always the males, and the women need to praise them. It is the use of the women in cultural matter. The novel states, "After the big wrestling match between Ikezue and Okafo, the women sang and praise Okafo, the winner of the match" (86). This is a small example that women are exploited economically and culturally in the Nigerian culture which is portrayed in the text.

The issue of gender in the novel is shaped by traditional norms and characterized by oppression. Heterosexuality and polygamy are prevalent in Nigerian society. The consciousness of masculine power is governing the mind of males. Having many wives and children is a matter of pride among them. The males are to be strong

enough sexually, and should be the father of many children – the symbol of strong masculinity. Okonkwo is so strongly sex conscious that he claims about his son with his friend Obierika. Sex conscious here means he needs to be strong with every masculine power. The attitude of Okonkwo towards male is always controlling over women. He argues being a male is also the ability to impregnate women or it is the strong masculinity. It says in the novel, "Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman" (62). Masculinity is to be strong and maturity is to be measured in his sexual power. Sexual power in man is the symbol of power and existence. Nigerian males count the sexual strength as the power to be male. If a male cannot impregnate it is feminine quality, they believe.

Women in Nigerian culture and society are completely like outsiders. In cultural functions, the women are the labour like but not the part of function or ceremony. In marriage ceremonies and in social gatherings the women are only the audiences and they are the outsiders. The main participants are the males and the winning and defeating the game or some event in their part of pride. In reference to a cultural ceremony the text writes; "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for man. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (83). It is the clear picture in the novel and in Nigerian society that the centre is the man and women are the other and second as suggested by Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*. Further Spivak's call to speak by the subaltern women is clearly portrayed in the text. Women are like the outsiders and they are only allowed to watch from the far distance with their position in the fringe. The males are the centres and the women are the fringe or at the margin. They are the subaltern and the others as they do not get any central role in ceremonies.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the problem of women in Nigerian culture or society; they are never allowed to speak up, and when they dare to speak; they are ignored through various ways like silencing, ridiculing, and threatening. They are subjugated physically and mentally inside and outside their homes. They are subaltern women who are never allowed to speak up and make their space. Okonkwa's mother and his wife Ekwefi are always ignored and forced to remain silent. Ekwefi dares to protest once but she is completely ignored and made silent. Odukwe takes his wife Mabafo as his property; he bought her as a commodity. He consumes her to make his life easy. Key findings of the study suggest that masculinity and women's deprivation and lack of economic independence are prevalent everywhere throughout Nigerian society, which is vividly presented and documented in the novel with realistic examples. Beating and assault are common forms of violence against women exposed throughout the novel. The main objective and implication of the findings is to encourage women in all societies and cultures to speak out and strive for independence and equality with men. This paper contributes to the feminist movement, particularly in advancing social, political, gender, racial, and cultural emancipation for women. Throughout history, women have been exploited, marginalized, and excluded from the mainstream, often constructed as 'the Other'—an inferior gender, class, or race, and as incomplete beings. It encourages women to speak out and actively assert their identities and social positions. It further opens up the study of women's roles within the culture of the maternal household. In the maternal home, women occupy different and often more positive roles, where their voices are acknowledged and valued. This presents a potential area for further research into why women are marginalized in their natal homes and treated differently in their marital or paternal homes.

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