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Source: *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring 2011), pp. 16-31

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41210316>

Accessed: 25-03-2020 13:58 UTC

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Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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The “post”-culture¹ has proved something of an emancipatory, albeit transgressive platform upon which contemporary society has had to engage itself in comprehensive collective auto-scrutiny, a conjectural exercise which seems to shatter and/or explode orthodoxies of thought and feeling, undercut traditional certitudes and pieties and, consequently, usher in a new sensibility which in turn favours multi-perspectivism and radical skepticism. Accordingly, the new post-modern sensibility seems to abandon formalism, rationalism and classical realism, preferring instead what Steven Best and Douglas Kellner call the “analysis of the subjective response of the reader within a psychological, social and historical context” (10). A new playfulness, a new insouciance, irony, cynicism and, sometimes, downright nihilism, are all imbricated within the hermeneutic circle of postmodernism (10). Thus, countercultural movements as well as bohemian subcultures seem to have a field day colonizing textual/sexual space, with conventional moralism beating a terminal retreat. Welcome to the “unleashing of instinct, impulse, and will” (12), a post-Nietschean age which “exhibits an extension of the rebellious, anti-bourgeois, antinomic and hedonistic impulses” (13). This new climate of aggressive narcissism calls to question the institutional adequacy of mainstream culture, intimating a whole network of conspiracies and normative blackmail which tend to keep the individual in thrall. One of the major casualties of the postmodern revolt is the decline of Cartesian rationalism or dualism based as it was on Enlightenment reason and truth. By the same token, therefore, the spirit of negation and revolt which informs postmodernism also interrogates such categories as theory, society, history, politics, and culture. At this juncture, it might be illuminating and insightful for us to advert our attention to the usefulness of Discourse theory, one of the cognate theories constructed around postmodern theory itself (26).

According to Best and Kellner, “Discourse theory sees all social phenomena as structured semiotically by codes and rules, and therefore amenable to linguistic analysis, utilizing the model of signification and signifying practices. Discourse theorists argue that meaning is not simply given, but is socially constructed across a number of institutional sites and practices” (26). Thus the *constructedness* or artificiality of meaning vitiates Enlightenment rationalist discourse and calls into question yet again representational epistemology. And,

given the androcentric (Greek *andros* “male”) nature of human society, the politics of gender has proved particularly problematic. Let the point be made without equivocation that this so-called ‘politics of gender’ is inextricably tied to the whole question of representation: from the dim past, patriarchy had constructed androcentric codes and signs which were sexist in nature, used to arrogate primacy and authority to the male over the female in the human community. Beyond, therefore, the *constructedness* of meaning or the artificial manipulation of gender, social perception based on available knowledge is also key to the understanding of the subject. K. K. Ruthven argues that

it is believed that in the phallocratic order of knowledge perpetuated in our patriarchal society, the kind of looking which results in “knowing” is likely to be exploitative. For knowledge is treated as something quite separate from the knower, and as capable of being known “objectively,” provided the knower aspires to “impersonality,” separating self from object in order to give the self power over objects. Men see knowledge, in other words, as something to be ‘mastered’ in the way that women are to be mastered. (2)

The gender situation has therefore rigged up disparities, dichotomies, polarities and complexities between the sexes in society, giving rise to the ages-old battle of the sexes. Yet what is perceived as sexual difference is, after all, socially produced or culturally derived (Ezeigbo xiii). We are told that radical feminist critics charge that “men *create* the world from their own point of view, which then *becomes* the truth to be described” (Catherine Mackinnon 537; qtd. in Ezeigbo xii). This lopsided gender stereotyping or mainstreaming leaves the female in a parlous and precarious position of marginality, an existential outsider whose physiological features render cosmic *persona non grata*. The othering of the feminine is further fraught with role differentiation which is informed by the alleged congenital inferiority of the female sex. Tradition therefore further encourages and engenders psychic repression of the female sex, making girls and women take the backseat in social affairs as though that is their *natural* place in life. In an essentially culture-bound and patriarchal environment, the question is, how does it feel to live as a woman? And what makes one person “male” and the other “female”? *Biological* determinism or cultural definition? If we grant that a biologically-defined female possesses some of the values of manliness ascribed to men by patriarchy, can that woman then qualify to be referred to as “male” and *vice versa*? These posers become significant against the backcloth of Adrienne Rich’s assertion that “every mind resides in a body?” (qtd. in Ezeigbo viii). That is to say, in every man (or woman) there are both “male” and “female” traits; the more pronounced or predominant sexual traits give the individ-

ual his/her gender identity. Following from this premise a man may be referred to as “female” if he *acts* like a woman and *vice versa*.

In the traditional symbolic order of representation, the male genital, otherwise known as ‘the phallus’ is taken to be the principal signifier of power and authority: the index of male. And being *male* connotes masculinity, manliness, valour, courage, animal force of will and raw physical strength. On the other hand, being *female* throws up images of tenderness, maudlin sentimentality, or lacrymoseness, mothering protectiveness and accommodation, affection and pacifism, love and domesticity. While arrogating normative order to itself, phallocentrism deprecates the “second sex,” as the psychoanalytic term ‘penis-envy’ amply testifies. Until recently, group survival and social mobility was driven and propelled by values of brawn as against the application of wit, manliness as against intellectual graces such as mental acuity, intelligence and insight. Although from the beginning of time, human civilization has been based on the complementary role of reason and passion (or brute force), as society got increasingly technologically sophisticated and more complex, there has been less and less dependence on these social values of raw physical energy or animal strength conventionally designated as “male” to a greater dependence on such values as intellectual acumen, cerebral strength and imagination formerly deprecatingly dubbed “female.” Thus, the world of today is principally powered by the “female” principle, thereby making the “female” in all of us reassert itself as the propulsive force of progressive change and social transformation.

Read against this backdrop, the character and the personality of the protagonist of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*,² namely, Okonkwo, and those of other characters such as Unoka, Nwoye, Obierika and Ezinma, can be meaningfully re/presented and therefore, reinterpreted. By all accounts, Okonkwo remains “male” no matter the methodological benchmark by which we try to assess him: a flat character embodying the best in the Igbo culture’s notion of manliness and masculinity, the very measure of “male” potential on the one hand and on the other, totalizing the very worst in the society’s idea of balance, moderation, cool-headed pragmatism, compassion, commonsensical savvy and humaneness. Okonkwo is not the shining beacon on a hill for his tribe, the paragon of communal manly ideal, congenitally and incrementally flawed as he is.

This ostensibly lopsided nature of the Okonkwo persona is what the novelist, Chinua Achebe, seeks to rectify through the creation of the person of Obierika. There has been a steady burgeoning in the interpretive as well as the exegetical excursus of the Okonkwo-Obierika polarity, thus giving rise to kindred binarisms. Not much interpretive capital will be procured or/and discursive purpose served by any gratuitous meta-criticism on that score here. Suffice it to comment in passing that most of the commentaries on the Okonkwo-Obierika nexus rightly stress the two characters’ psychic interpenetration. The standard

procedure for this has been the so-called complementary duality as a principle of characterization. Accordingly, Obierika ceases in the process, on the one hand, to be a distinct single human entity, an individual, and, on the other hand, he still remains a full-blooded specimen of a *homo viator*, even far more realized and, consequently, more likeable and *real*—character-in-the-round. To adumbrate this point further based on the strategy of complementary duality in character drawing, Obierika becomes an appendage or an extension of Okonkwo, the main human vehicle on whom the narrative's movement of meaning and significative idiom is anchored. This reading, verging on tendentiousness as it might seem, is in part informed by the implicit wisdom in the Adrienne Rich dictum, cited earlier on. Stretched logically, Okonkwo's multiple selves/personalities comprehend and subsume other less-iconic figures such as his confidant-friend, Obierika. This is more so because Okonkwo is portrayed as almost entirely "male." In *Things Fall Apart*, we are told: "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (20).

Interestingly, Obierika, the narrator informs us, "was a man who thought about things" (89) while "Okonkwo was *not* a man of thought but action" (49). Obierika's natural predisposition towards introspection, cool-headedness, wisdom, humour and an unprepossessing self-deportment combine to recommend him to the informed reader as a "female" character. Easily the most admirably sculpted, rounded character in the narrative, Obierika strikes a responsive chord in us because he is the ultimate fulfilment of his tribe's concept of balance and elegant good breeding, an attitude of mind analogous to the European renaissance notion of "the courtier" (see Castiglione 1967). To be sure, Obierika is a successful farmer, a brave warrior and titled personage with a large household. A man of wisdom and a rather urbane skeptical cast of mind, Obierika's Euripidean hard-headed pragmatism and questioning proclivities pedestal him as the cusp of Umuofian self-regulatory dynamism. The point to be made is, Obierika owes his winsome personableness to the supersession of his "male" attributes and the corresponding predominance of his "female" traits. The supreme irony in all of this, it would seem, is to be located within the clan's tacit preference for the *female* values as embodied by Obierika in spite of her much-advertised valorization and apotheosisation of the male principle or phallocentrism, which Okonkwo, in large measures, epitomizes. Put baldly, the central issue in *Things Fall Apart* is that of gender: Chinua Achebe's *gendering* of such cognate categories as language, notions of heroism, administration of justice, achievement, social visibility/relevance, power relations, governance, occupational roles, the flora and fauna, and child-rearing. Viewed through the lens of gender, the accumulated cobwebs of five decades of misreading of the epic classic, *Things Fall*

Apart are sloughed off and then, we no longer “see darkly” but clearly. (See Rose Mezu, M.E.M. Kolawole, 1997, Ezeigbo 1996 and Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves 1986.)

As earlier highlighted, Obierika does not incur the tribe’s derogation of the less-attractive aspects of the feminine principle because of his admirable track record in such “male” activities as warfare, farming and community leadership. However, Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, does not escape his people’s collective denunciation. This is so because of a number of reasons. First, Unoka’s physical outlook is uninspiring: “he was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute” (4). Second, his aversion for war and revulsion at the sight of blood: ‘Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood’ (5). Third, he is very prodigal and lazy, a wastrel *par excellence*: “In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called his neighbours and made merrym” (3-4). Fourth, Unoka’s *joie de vivre* and his typical insouciance culminate in his indebtedness and a life of failure: “Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer...” (4).

Quite predictably, Unoka ends up in the clan’s Evil Forest, quickly forgotten and unmourned. Yet, Unoka is not an out-and-out, thoroughgoing hedonist or a vacuous epicure. His profession as a man of music and song lifts him off the opprobrious sub-cultural moral morass. While Okonkwo, his scion represents the “male” principle, Unoka stands for the “female”. It is true that he incurs a lot of debts from his neighbours and fellow villagers, Unoka is never a threat to group survival or social progress. Even after the harvest season, the people hang their farm implements and tools to *recreate* themselves through such diversion as music-making, dancing and storytelling and, even the highly regarded art of conversation. Under this convivial scenario, the likes of Unoka keep the field: Chinua Achebe remarks: “He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace” (4).

Man’s innate love of song and dance has always ridden roughshod over the direst of life’s buffetings. Thus even during warfare, music occupies a place of pride. Hardly in any human society and at any time is this not the case. Little wonder, then, every military formation across the world in all countries has its corps of musicians. To demonstrate the antiquity of music in war, Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* narrates:

To some of us the Owner of the World has apportioned the gift to tell their fellows that the time to get up has finally come. To others He gives the eagerness to rise when they hear the call; to rise with racing blood and put on their garbs of war and go to the boundary of their town to engage the invading enemy boldly in battle. And then there are those others whose part is to wait and when the struggle is ended, to take over and recount its story. (113)

By the same token, therefore, it is assumed Unoka (as dramatized in Chuck Mike's Television adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* shown on Nigerian Television Authority, [NTA] in the late 1980s in Nigeria), in the episode entitled "Footprints of A Tiger" constitutes a one-man ensemble at the ringside during the famed wrestling match between Okonkwo and Amalinze the Cat. While Okonkwo strains to throw Amalinze, his Umuofia people look on with bated breath as the wily cat appears set to trump the uppity pretender to the throne. What could have struck the Umuofia clan as unmitigated disaster had Okonkwo failed to carry the day is amazingly overturned by the singularity of Unoka's artistic intervention in the thick of the fray. He plays on his flute for Okonkwo, his flute-song telling of the legendary line of warriors and cult heroes from which his son, Okonkwo, supposedly descended; and this crucial detail about the wrestler's ancestral memory imbues Okonkwo with uncanny and preternatural strength and forensic equipment. Thus, Unoka's music gives Okonkwo his victory and immortal fame, and by extension, empowers the entire Umuofia clan. This tribal debt of gratitude, due Unoka, is never explicitly acknowledged either by the novel's narrator or the Umuofia people themselves. And even more admirably poignant is the fact that Unoka himself does not set about indulging in self-gratulatory chest-thumping as Okonkwo, his son, would have done. What the Unoka story seems to suggest is that art or works of imagination may probably be rightfully located within the domains of the female mystique. It is also believed that women are smarter than men. However, while women cannot, in the light of objective scientific research, be said to write better than men do, maybe due in large part to male-imposed societal constraints, human society owes its continued existence to women, first and foremost, as "womb-men" (that is, mothers) and, secondarily, as arbiters of restraint and equilibrium (see Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*).

In *Things Fall Apart* Unoka is derogatorily referred to as "*agbala*," that is, a woman. There is good reason to assume that even Chinua Achebe does not reckon that he is *indeed* creating a woman in Unoka, his physiological kit notwithstanding. The question to ask at this juncture is, what does it mean to be a "woman" in the traditional context of Umuofia or from the standard of humanity? And to what extent has the traditional concept of woman changed (if it has

indeed changed) in contemporary times? The Igbo traditional society and culture was a phallocratic one like most cultures and societies across the world. As earlier stressed, to be “male” meant that one had to be well-built, physique-wise; possesses brute energy and aggressive, exhibiting love of danger and thus deriving exultant joy from bloodlust; successful in business, namely, farming, hunting, fishing and presiding over a flourishing family with many wives and numerous children to boot. In short, being a man is the linchpin of the warrior ethic upon which a heroic culture is built.

Conversely, therefore, to be a “woman,” apart from the biological details of physiological features (such as vagina, breasts, and pudenda), one had to be seen to exhibit moral weaknesses such as gossiping, cantankerousness, laziness, talkativeness, treacherousness, inconstancy, feeble-mindedness, fearfulness, and timorousness, and unreliability. It is therefore, not enough as far as the Igbo traditional irredentists were concerned to dangle a penis between your thighs to qualify to be classified as “man” or “male.” You must be made of sterner stuff: you must possess the entelechial drive to scale any hurdle. A breach of this social ideal by any “man” automatically condemns him to the never-never land of gender mis-classification. He is considered as an aberrant freak of nature, an apology in the footnote of social existential high drama. Even when judged against the androcentric criteria of traditional Igbo culture, Unoka appears hard done by his people. Apart from the fact that they do not openly acknowledge Unoka’s praiseworthy contribution to Okonkwo’s heroic feat, the villagers do not seem to appreciate Unoka’s philosophic repudiation of acquisitiveness and crass materialism, a tawdry and sickening state of affairs that tends to make coarse and deaden their own collective metaphysical ideal.

To be certain, Unoka’s musicianship and his outgoing nature are aspersed by his people, making one ask, is Unoka not more sinned against than sinning? If we grant that Obierika wins our admiration and that of the novelist as well as the Umuofia clan, through his “female” characteristics, then, we can logically argue that not everything “female” is bad and deleterious. Obierika and Unoka both possess the gift of reflection, deep thought and a sense of balance. Therefore, both men at face value strike us as representatives or paradigms of two extremes of the female principle: on the other hand, while Unoka represents the negative traits of the “female” such as talkativeness, squeamishness, timidity and laziness; Obierika, on the other hand, represents the positive elements of the feminine ideal. Yet, there is a sense in which even Unoka comes through as an admirable embodiment of the female principle as demonstrated by his artistic inclination and pacific penchant. Consequently, even though his creator, Chinua Achebe, intends him to be an antithesis or some kind of counterweight to his son, Okonkwo (as undeniably shown by the “agbala” tag), Unoka still appeals to our sympathetic understanding as a winsome “female” character.

Earlier in this paper, we mention in passing the importance of Discourse theory to our explicatory project here and the theory's connection to the post-modern theory itself. On the face of it, it appears a little unsettling referring to men or boys as female and *vice versa*. But we are trying to look beyond mere physicality and pay closer attention to the psyche, the unconscious intensities as well as the affective wellspring of fictional characters in the text under discussion. Therefore some elements of Discourse theory can illuminate (or further enhance) the understanding of our concepts. In their book entitled *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner reveal that:

Discourse theory can be read as a variant of semiotics which develops the earlier project of analyzing society in terms of systems of signs and sign systems. Saussure had proposed developing a semiotics of "the life of signs in society" and Barthes, the early Baudrillard, and others followed through on this to analyze the semiotics of myth, culture, consumption, and other social activities. (26-27)

Best and Kellner provide relevant information on Discourse theory by positing that "[M]uch postmodern theory follows discourse theory in assuming that it is language, signs, images, codes, and signifying systems which organize the psyche, society, and everyday life" (27). Based on such a methodological paradigm, Achebe as a prose stylist, a conscious craftsman and deft manipulator of language, is seen to use signs, images, codes to convey meaning or "message" in *Things Fall Apart*. In addition, he also manipulates the ironic strategy in setting forth the Umuofia clan's metaphysical system. For example, their Oracle of the Hills and the Caves is called *Agbala* (*Agbala* is also the pejorative name for a woman (10), an opprobrious label Unoka carries with him like an albatross). The all-powerful and dreaded Oracle is male while he has a priestess as his visible human representative as exemplified in the Unoka visit to the Oracle (12-13). This differing use of the word "Agbala" by Achebe in his novel, first, in reference to the Oracle (12) and, second, to derogate Unoka (10), tends to create some confusion particularly for the non-native reader. There is clearly a problem in the "meanings" of the word itself as it seems to convey various sociological meanings in Igbo land and Igbo language. Besides, we are told that the active principle in Umuofia's dreaded war-medicine is an old woman called *agadi-nwayi*.

This old woman can be seen as another totem representing another power configuration in the people's cosmology. Even though the physical manifestation of her acts and deeds is *masculine*, the spiritual principle behind such acts and deeds is *feminine* (see Beatrice and Idemili in *Anthills of the Savannah*). Thus, the warlike, "male" Umuofia clan owes her military power and dominance to the female principle as embodied by both the Oracle (whom we are told "no one had ever beheld Agbala except his priestess" (12) and *Agadi-nwayi* (the

mystical old woman). Interestingly, when Unoka, the *agbala* (the “female” or “woman”) goes to consult Chika, Agbala’s priestess, she commands him: “go home and work *like* a man” (13, emphasis added,). This counsel is informed by the fact that Unoka all along has been a gardener like a woman rather than own a farm *like* a man does. This is in clear conformity with manipulating the ironic strategy in discourse theory, an ironic disposition which the author adopts in his work as a major structural device. The *gendering* of space also comes to the fore here: tilling the ground near the homestead like Unoka does makes his exertions merely womanish or feminine while the cultivation of food crops in the distant wild forests confers masculinity on the person involved. It is in this regard that the difference between Unoka (“female”) and his friend, Okoye (“male”) becomes apparent.

From Best and Kellner’s point of view, these constitute “signs, images, and signifying systems” which organize the people’s and society’s psyche in gender specificity. Furthermore, crops are also gendered in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, for instance, narrates that Okonkwo’s “mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like cocoyams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (16). According to Abiola Irele,

This defining feature of the tribe is highlighted by the centrality of the yam to the culture and the symbolic value with which it is invested, over and above its utility as a source of nourishment, a feature that provides a graphic illustration of the continuum from material existence to collective vision and ethos. Because of the intense muscular effort required for its cultivation, the yam crop comes to represent an annual triumph wrested from nature, the sign of the rigorous dialectic between the human world and the natural environment, which governs the communal life and conditions what one might call the social aesthetic . . . the image of the yam gathers up the force fields of the culture and functions as a metonymic representation of the tribe’s mode of relation to the world. (126)

This metonymic function of the yam is tellingly encapsulated in the narrative itself when Achebe reports: “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed” (24).

Moreover, the yam as Umuofia’s representation of its mode of relation to the world is equally borne out by the calendrical centrality of the yearly New yam festival, the most momentous communal *rites de passage* and feast of eternal return. Thus, Umuofia’s experience of time and the ceaseless movement of the seasons is principally regulated by the various stages in the cultivation of the yam. The cultivation of yam, an exclusively sexist occupation gives primacy to the open demonstration of strength. Hence, Achebe tells us that: “Okonkwo

never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness, the only thing worth demonstrating was strength” (20). A man’s physical strength helps him harness the resources and the munificence of nature as shown by a bumper harvest of yams. This feat in turn facilitates his eligibility to take chieftaincy titles with the attendant social prestige and power. Osugo in the novel is a man without a title, hence Okonkwo puts him down as “a woman” (19) who must not be welcomed in the gathering of men. Yet, Chinua Achebe goes on to expose the limits and the limitations of this masculine ideal by reminding us that: “Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was a close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth” (26). Ani, the earth goddess, is said to be “the source of all fertility” (26).

Remarkably, Ani chooses not a woman but a male acolyte, a priest called Ezeani to go between her and the tribe. Thus, when Okonkwo desecrates the land by beating his wife, Ojiugo, during the sacred Week of Peace, Ezeani chides him: “the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (22). In this context, the female principle in the figure of the earth goddess, Ani, engages the services of a male (Ezeani) to do her biddings. If Ani, a female deity, wields tremendous power and chooses a male intermediary, we are, then, constrained to reassess gender-frames, based on roles, occupation, skills, abilities, and so forth. As a consequence, one’s role in society or occupation, or even skills becomes a signifier of one’s gender. This gender reconfiguration is played out between Okonkwo’s children, especially Nwoye and Ezinma. Nwoye, like his grandfather, Unoka, may be considered a “female” character for a number of reasons.

First, he is not vividly characterized as a very strong, vigorous character with force of personality; second, he is said to detest aggression and stories or folktales about wars and bloodletting; third, he is not particularly enamoured of the tasking demands of farm work as his father makes his household work on the farm from cock crow to nightfall; fourth, his final repudiation of his ancestral religion and his conversion to Christianity, among other things. Okonkwo is perspicacious enough to discern “incipient laziness” in Nwoye, an early disturbing reminder of the second coming of Unoka, in a manner of speaking. Okonkwo tries to change his son through high-handed and cruel means but to no avail. He thus laments: ‘I am worried about Nwoye . . . where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies? If Eziwa had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit’ (47). Okonkwo is made to bemoan

his fate further: "I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a *man*, but there is too much of his mother in him" (47).

Chinua Achebe deliberately creates an aureole of mystery around the character of Ezinma. A spirit-child born after a series of deaths of her siblings, Ezinma holds a special place in the hearts of her parents. She survives the nagging capriciousness of her *Ogbanje* lot to grow into a beautiful maiden, bringing joy and pride to Okonkwo and Ekwefi. As part of her delineation, Ezinma, we are told, combines intelligence and nimbleness with her striking beauty. At ten, "she was wiser than her years" (29). There seems to be a kind of rapport between Okonkwo and Ezinma such that when Okonkwo is experiencing stress or sorrow (as he does after the ritualized execution of Ikemefuna and Okonkwo's humiliating imprisonment by the colonial masters) Ezinma "nurses" him to life. Ezinma acts like a boy: for instance, as a ten-year old, she does not know how to sit like a girl, hence Okonkwo chides her: "sit like a woman!" (22). Also, apart from her inquisitiveness, Ezinma offers to carry her father's chair to the elders' meeting, a task undertaken by male children only.

However, Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, seems to be interested in making Ezinma his priestess-in-waiting, chaperoned as she is by Chielo, the incumbent priestess of Agbala. This "divine" interest in Ezinma seems also to later pit Okonkwo (and his wife Ekwefi) against Chielo, a ding-dong affair that is tinged with a scintilla of gender. Achebe narrates: "The priestess suddenly screamed. 'Beware, Okonkwo!' she warned. 'Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a *man* speak when a god [or Chielo, the god's physical embodiment] speaks? Beware!" (72).

The Okonkwo-Chielo conflict over Ezinma becomes a contestation of power and gender relations. This power tussle to have proprietary access to Ezinma is the latest *coup de grace* suffered by Okonkwo in a series of deflationary ego-amputation. Let us keep in mind that Okonkwo has previously committed some infractions against his tribe, such grave indiscretions as the *nso-ani* or the defilement of the earth by indulging in wife-battering during the Week of Peace, the near-murder of his second wife, Ekwefi and the mindless and cowardly slaughtering of his adopted "son," Ikemefuna. To underline this last heinous crime committed by Okonkwo, the narrator ironically jeers: "His mind went to his latest show of manliness" (47). Yet, what Okonkwo considers "manly," is deprecated by his *alter ego*, Obierika: "what you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families" (47). Okonkwo has a rigid and unreflecting understanding of the laws of the land but Obierika is more pragmatic, circumspect and politic. It is his own excessive masculinity which Okonkwo seeks to replicate in Nwoye and his other sons, and it is the constitutive elements of his own notion of manliness that he glimpses in Ezinma. Achebe thus plays a cruel trick on Okonkwo by imbuing a girl with

“male” traits, as we have tried to demonstrate. The point bears stressing that, Nwoye is referred to as “degenerate and effeminate,” and as “a woman” (110) by Okonkwo (that is “female”), while Ezinma can be seen as “male” despite her sex.

In spite of the fact that Umuofia owes her religion and morality as well as her economic growth and development to the female ideal as embodied in Ani, the earth goddess; the people still marginalize and deride women and girls generally. Nearly in all cases when crucial issues of communal importance are discussed and considered, men always see to it that women are sidelined, excluded and shut out. During the engagement ceremony of Obierika’s daughter, Akueke, for instance, all women are *absent* from the culturally significant event, not even the bride-to-be’s mother is allowed in the gathering of men who negotiate the bride price.

Akueke’s father, after the successful conclusion of the ceremony, sends for his wife: “Go and tell Akueke’s mother that we have finished” (52). Even at the same event, the men regale themselves with hearsay and stories about the customs and traditions of other tribes and clans which they deride as inferior to theirs: “The world is large,” said Okonkwo. “I have even heard that in some tribes a man’s children belong to his wife and her family.” “That cannot be,” said Muchi. “You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children” (52). This sexist policy of exclusion and closure is repeatedly practised in Umuofia, like the episode where the Egwugwu comprising nine titled men representing the villages which make up the clan gather to settle disputes. Achebe writes, “It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but *they looked on from the fringe like outsiders*. The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin” (63. *Emphasis added*). The Egwugwu soon settle down to business and start adjudicating on the fight between a couple, Mgbafo and her husband Uzowulu. Udukwe, Mgbafo’s relative, at the trial threatens Uzowulu that he (Udukwe) will “cut off his genital for him” (60) should Uzowulu beat his wife, Mbafo, again. Chinua Achebe here hints at the generally-held notion that the male organ, the penis, is the symbolic signifier of power. By thus threatening castration, Udukwe is telling his in-law that he is going to make him (Uzowulu) a “woman,” thereby effecting gender “equality.” The question is, what is a man without his penis? Small wonder, then, Uzowulu is counseled by the adjudicating Egwugwu. “It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman” (67)

Interestingly, it is this stress placed on inordinate masculinity or machismo which gets the novel’s protagonist, Okonkwo, in trouble a couple of times and, then, ultimately leads him to manslaughter during the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezen-

du. Okonkwo is immediately banished from his clan, Umuofia and he along with his large family end up in exile in Mbanta, his late mother's homeland. Using the Discourse theory, there is a sense in which we can taxonomise Umuofia and Mbanta into some kind of binary opposition: given Umuofia's excessive pursuit of the male ideal as well as her invidious policy of andocentric sexism, we may meaningfully regard her as "male" or masculine while, conversely, Mbanta with the image of maternal protectiveness and affective succour comes across as "female" or feminine. Although Okonkwo's fleeing to Mbanta cannot be read correctly as intimating a kind of atavistic womb-wish, it nevertheless approximates the strategic self-preservative retreat of a beaten, bruised and battered ego. Also, the number of years of Okonkwo's exile is significant: he spends *seven* years in Mbanta. The number *seven*, especially in eschatological symbolism, stands for completeness. Thus Achebe delivers an ironic sucker punch to Umuofia's concept of patriarchal social arrangement as he seems to be exposing their ethical hollowness and dismissing the men as poseurs or mimic men.

On the eve of his PEN American Center celebration, Achebe granted an interview to Carol Cooper of the *Voice*. Cooper wanted to know what the female characters represent in *Things Fall Apart*. And Achebe replied that, "...they stand for [...] the very thing which the male-dominated society does not consider. If you go back to *Things Fall Apart*, all the problems Okonkwo has from beginning to end are related to ignoring the female. And that is where he is a flawed hero. Women stand for compassion" [emphasis added].³ Okonkwo, by all accounts, totalizes the tragic futility of the deification of masculinity. A countervailing perspective is found in the *female* name: *Nneka* meaning "Mother is Supreme" (96). There is, without a doubt, a heretical ring to this sexist truism under a male-dominated social universe, more so for a man noted for his impatience and aversion for anything "female". Yet, down on his luck and utterly woe-begone, Okonkwo endures his maternal uncle, Uchendu's commiseratory counsel:

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father [Umuofia] beats his child, it [Okonkwo] seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (96-97)

Okonkwo's grudging concession of defeat, albeit for a brief spell as future developments amply demonstrate, finds expression in his christening of his exilic daughter, *Nneka* ("mother is supreme"). Sadly, the seven years of living among his mother's people have but a slight impact on Okonkwo's psychology and his outlook on life. He remains at bottom the same one-track-minded, unreflecting anachronism, in a rapidly changing world. Chinua Achebe tells us that "the clan was like a lizard, if it lost its tail it soon grew another" (123). This ser-

pentine metaphor of the Igbo culture underscores the dispensability of the citizen, regarded here as “tail.” Okonkwo, we are told, is left behind in the communal onward march towards change; and change spectacularly arrives in the shape of the “locust” or “the leper”: the invading European colonialists. Combining the rapacity of the locust with the corrosive contagion of leprosy, the white man effectively destroys the autochthonous and endogenous value-system of the subject clan and imposes his alien way of life as instantiated by Christianity and civil administration, among other things. Okonkwo, who fails to see the “method in the overwhelming madness” (128), upon his return from exile, embarks upon a revenge mission against the colonial overlords. He kills the leader of the colonial masters’ messengers and, betrayed by his people, commits suicide. Okonkwo’s pathetic death signifies the demise of andocentric arbitrariness in Umuofia as shown by the increasing social visibility of women and the Christian prohibition of the casting away of twins. A new democratic republicanism and an egalitarian ethos becomes the normative order, thus dismantling in the process gender stereotyping or inequality.

It is against this backdrop that we can usefully examine the psycho-sexual principle at work in this interpretive discourse. The theory of psycho-sexuality posits a fluid and gender-neutral sexual revolution whereby an individual, irrespective of his or her sex, can play any sexual role or/and follow his/her sexual orientation or preference. The psycho-sexual theory is firmly accommodated within the institutional rubric of Cultural Studies. For example, other more popular signifying practices such as films and television are deployed to showcase the trans-sexuality of literature characters as well as figures in other various forms of cultural representation. By the same token, characters like Unoka, Nwoye, Ezinma, Obierika, Anasi, Nwakibie’s “male” senior wife, and the couple, Ndulue and Ozoemena can be made to play different sexual roles. This gender *volte-face* can be achieved through a cinematic strategy of exteriorizing and objectifying the characters’ supposedly *latent* pre-constructed sexual identities. If anything, a sexual revolution is underway in today’s world, what with the increasing secularization of society with its corollary of desacralising heretofore cultural practices, social norms, taboos, inhibitions, among others. Also, with the high level of cultural relativism with its consequent permissiveness, conventional notions of human rights and personal freedoms have equally undergone a sea-change. Accordingly, some sexual orientations and preferences hitherto frowned at are now being accommodated and generally accepted as normal and legitimate.

Thus, homosexuality, lesbianism, same-sex marriage practices and so forth are now legalized in some countries, especially in the West. The postmodern condition has proven a very conducive environment for the emergence of these

sexual freedoms as the male phallus is no longer perceived to be the symbol of oppressive authority or power. Thus, such superannuated, fanciful terms as “penis-envy,” “Electra-complex,” and other Freudian-Lacanian terminology have been rendered obsolete and irrelevant. The key to social relevance and power is no longer one’s genitalia but the content of one’s cranium: brain power, a thing that has been proven gender-neutral.

It is the staking-out of the discursive space by the emancipatory strategies of postmodernism that have afforded us the chance to attempt this reinterpretation of gender in *Things Fall Apart*. This is, as earlier noted, in line with the fundamental integration of the nature and the function of representation and the politics of knowledge. Gender has been shown to be a multi-perspectival construct undergoing relentless critiquing and enquiry. Therefore, as a socio-cultural construct which has tenuous basis in biologism, social perception of male-female dichotomies has equally changed considerably, so much so that a man as biologically configured can be *seen* as “female” and *vice versa*. This is the whole point of psycho-sexuality, the very hypothetical basis of this present study. Under the new post-modern sensibility, essentialistic theories of human behaviour are discredited and, thus, discarded. In this connection, male-specific and female-specific characteristics are jettisoned as characters are returned to their pre-constructed *natural* states. Even stock characters like Okonkwo can be sufficiently feminised by giving vent to the unconscious articulations of feminine desire or traces (Ruthven 19) in him. It will be a classic case of the Freudian return of the repressed.

So far, what our Socio-Semio-Psycho-Marxist feminist theorizing has tried to demonstrate is the inherent wisdom in Adrienne Rich’s statement, namely, “every mind resides in a body”; and that gender, as argued by Ruthven, is a product of the “sex-coding processes of acculturation” (8). Finally, if “woman” is not an essence but a construct in the domain of patriarchal culture, a dispersed subject, historically variable, socially feminised, and a site on which masculine meanings get spoken and masculine desires enacted” (45), then “male” characters—like the Umuofia men before the white man (146)—can be interpreted as female and *vice versa*. Read this way, hitherto conventional readings become warped and wrongheaded, since most of the characters are leading “false” lives, engaged as they are in make-believe, in an elaborate ritual of collective self-clowning and impersonation.

Notes

¹Niyi Osundare in his paper entitled “African Literature and the Crisis of Post-structuralist Theorizing” has this to say: “Let me begin by confessing to a nagging unease about the ‘post-ness’ tagged on to contemporary theorizing in

general: post-structural, post-modernist, post-colonial, post-Marxist, post-industrial, etc. . . . This innocuous-looking prefix, 'post', kicks up temporal, spatial, even epistemological problems, operates most times on a set of fallacies which seduce us into a false consciousness that human thoughts, ideas, actions, experiences, and the significant events they generate are arrangeable in a linear, x-before-y-y-after-x framework, very much like a series of temporal scenarios in an over deterministic succession" (1). Osundare critics know full well that Niyi Osundare himself is an indefatigable poacher in the seductive orchards of post-modernism. Stephen Arnold's work on Osundare's poetry is a tip of the iceberg. That said, the contemporaneist inevitability of the postmodern sensibility forces all of us to take a look-in at the theory.

²*Things Fall Apart*, 1986. All further page references will be indicated in the text.

³This piece of information was gleaned from an e-mail sent to me by JOSANA, an interactive online chat-room for Nigerian writers. October 2008.

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