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WOMEN AS THE MOST VICTIMIZED; A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

ABDUL KAYOOM.V

Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department Of English
Pondicherry Central University,Kalapet, Puducherry

Abstract:

The worst effected group of a social system is none other than women especially the underprivileged women. Thee victimizations of the women in the patriarchal community are regulated at different times and places by the distinct discursive practices. Many rules and regulations prevalent in the societies are mainly in favor of the privileged sections. In the colonial period also, the dignity of the women is endangered. They are physically, sexually and psychologically abused. In a neo colonial world order, women are reduced to mere products or the channels to felicitate the trade and commerce of the products manufactured by the multinational companies.

INTRODUCTION:

Though Things fall apart, the famous novel by Chinua Achebe apparently deals with the cultural disintegration, it can't be sidelined that women represented in the novel undergoes the ordeal of onslaughts and tortures. The feminist and postcolonial studies share a lot of similarities with each other in many terms. The colonized people and the suppressed women feel the identity crisis and carry the burden of both the dominant discourse of the elite classes and imperialists. These oppressed classes are denied all the social privileges and undergo a plethora of victimization. They are sidelined from the mainstream and considered to be so worthless that their voice is not audible or often subdued. Their presence itself is made apparently invisible. So, post colonial writers and the feminist writers link their concerns as indicated above. In The Postcolonial Studies Reader, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, it is said that, "Until recently, feminist and post colonial discourses have followed a path of convergent evolution, their theoretical trajectories demonstrating striking similarities but rarely intersecting" (233).

Social constructivism is one of the major issues faced by women. A particular society attributes some roles and features to the entire women in that society so that every woman is confined to those stipulated attributions. The rules and disciplinary actions are constructed and manipulated by and for the convenience of men. Once a woman is under the suspicion of being guilty or trapped in a web of a particular law or convention, society gives no second thought to her protection; rather they are eager to punish her as early as possible. In the case of a man, his dignity of his life and safety of his future is favorably considered. Every traditional law is framed in such a way that women's concerns are not at all focused. During the war fares among clans and tribes, women and children are the worst affected. In Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe clearly hints at how an action against a boy (Ikemefuna) and a virgin girl is taken, consequent to a war. "At the end they decided, as everyday knew they would, that the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife. As for the boy, he belonged to the clan as a whole, and there was no hurry to decide his fate" (TFA 12). Here, an innocent girl from Mbaino is forcefully replaced at the position of a murdered woman as if a commercial product is replaced when another is damaged under the term of warranty. Instead of chastising the murderer in the crime, his innocent daughter is exiled to another country

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for the sake of being replaced. Then her identity itself is questioned in the sense that she is wife to Ogbuefi Udo, yet not an original wife, but a duplicate one. She suffers for not any crime done by her, but by another. Though the boy is also displaced, the society is not eager to take an immediate action against him; rather he is affectionately brought up by the protagonist, Okonkwo. His punishment is too much delayed.

In the novel, the secondary status attributed to a woman by the male community is clearly portrayed. The novel establishes the notion that certain roles are imposed upon the women and the women are the silent and obedient receivers of the jobs assigned to them without rights to show any sign of objection against it. When Ezinma offered Okonkwo to bring him a chair, he replies, "No, that is a boy's job" (TFA 41). The women are not supposed to engage in the agriculture of the Yams because "His (Okonkwo) mothers and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop". (TFA 21).

Another pathetic situation is that the women themselves internalize the stereotyping done by the patriarchal society. According to Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics*, women themselves are responsible, to a considerable extent, for their state of being victimized. The result of this internalization of the male discourse by the women is that they fail to identify the trap in which they are caught in. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe also suggests the same idea. When Okonkwo was child, his father Unoka would go to the priestess, Chika to inform his plaintive state of affairs due to his failure in the harvest of yam crops. Then the priestess suggested him to "go home and work like a man" (TFA 16). This order of Chika indicates that even Chika (Achebe particularly says that the priestess in those days was a woman called Chika) internalizes the notion that hard work is the attribute of a man and not of a woman. She indirectly suggests that Unoka is woman like. So, working hard as a man does alone can bring the success in the field of agriculture. The women themselves think that they are too weak in labour to produce yam crops. As mentioned above, there were crops designed to be cultivated for men and women separately. Even a priestess in the novel is not exempted from that stereotyping of the women community.

The word 'effeminate' is ascribed to Unoka. Though this word means 'weak', 'feeble' or 'infirm' etc., this term is actually related to 'woman' or 'female', etymologically. Jacques Lacan's term 'phallogocentrism', could be applied here. According to Lacan, the language is phalocentric. As Shakespeare says, "infirmity, thy name is woman". Here, the woman is termed as 'infirm'. In the novel, the female nature of Unoka is termed as effeminate. Unoka is represented as passive, lethargic and one without any title. These are the negative attributes given to him. These negative aspects of one's life are considered to be womanish though a male character shows them. In Igbo society, a man without any title is a man without bravery. So he is also feminine. "That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title" (TFA 13)

If a woman shows the positive qualities like courage, hard work, confidence and enthusiasm, the patriarchal society does not recognize it. The society has already constructed what a woman should have and what she should not have. If she has so called manly qualities, they are thought to be abnormal or antisocial or something against the destiny. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo says about his daughter Ezinma like this, "She should have been a boy", he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter" (TFA 57-58). Okonkwo says this because she serves him very much in a bold and enthusiastic way. She is very active in every matters, she is very enthusiastic and hard working in nature. She is very helpful to his family. But, Okonkwo cannot approve of these qualities in the girl, because these are considered to be manly traits. So, Ezinma is not supposed to show her own personal features. In another incident, "The priestess comes and says Agbala wants to meet Ezinma, Ekwefi firmly says to follow her. Then the priestess says, 'How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger'" (TFA 92). A woman like Ekwefi is considered to be insufficient to show the courage and boldness in front of Agbala, though it is for her own child's safety that she does it. The astonishment, 'how dare you, woman' (TFA 92) expressed by the priestess, Chielo towards Ekwefi, sends the message that the woman is not expected to express courage and strength. Women are represented from the negative and distorted angle.

The traditional ceremonies and conventions are male centered. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe draws it in a vivid way by portraying a ceremony in the village, Ilo. He explains that crowds gathered for the ceremony. Then, "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 the fringe like outsiders" (TFA 79). Even in a ceremonial function, the women are marginalized. They are treated as mere onlookers. It means that the discriminations against women are practiced even in public life. In the personal life of Igbo people, the discrimination against women is too much to bear. They underwent many tortures imposed by the men in the family. Okonkwo breaks the peace during the week of peace by beating his youngest wife. A man's identity itself is measured by the way he treats the women in his home. A man is considered good if he is able to successfully control the women and children in his family. The words, "No matter how a prosperous a man was, if he was unable

to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (TFA 48), indicate this fact. In the private life of a woman too, she has no right to think what to do. Everything is decided by the males in the family. Her role is so passive that she receives the order given by the male members of the family. It is easily perceptible from the order of Okonkwo that, “Do what you are told, woman,” (TFA 14). So these customs are constructed and practiced as an institutionalizing and legalizing apparatuses for the exploitation of the women in a phalocentric social system.

The problems found in the narratives dealing with the colonial issues have a lot to do with gender. To come to the novel, the readers are informed about the fate of Okonkwo. Even after he dies an abominable death, his unfavorable funeral ceremonies are delineated in detail so that the readers get the belief systems of the Igbo society. Though Okonkwo's boldness and courageous nature are eulogized and his titles praised so much in Umuofia that he becomes a leader of the village attaining a royal status, his wives who serves for him are not given a proper and justifiable representation in accordance with his fame. Apart from that, the readers are not informed at all about their destiny at the end of the story. The services rendered by his wives to him for his better success at public level are not referred in the novel. He mother's house is considered to be a shelter for taking refuge from the ostracism by the village community where as the father's land is represented as a site favorable for showing his vigor and vitality, and for accumulating title as well as amassing good fortune. “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 mother land” (TFA 122). It is his mother that makes him prepared for his second advancement towards the better public life. But, as is with the wives, his mother and the members of her house are given least significance in the end. Oyeronke Oyewumi, in *Colonizing Bodies and Minds*, demonstrates these ideas very deftly saying that, “The histories of the both the colonizer and the colonizer have been written from the male point of view – women are peripheral if they appear at all. While studies of the colonization written from this angle are not necessarily irrelevant to the understanding what happened to native females, we must recognize that colonization impacted males and females in similar and dissimilar ways” (Oyewumi 256).

The representation of the women in *Things Fall Apart* is too meager to be discussed, though they are more in number than male characters. Okonkwo alone has three wives. But the story is entirely circled round Okonkwo. All the three wives are represented as voiceless and they are cruelly beaten by the protagonist. But they do not respond to these and are almost treated as slaves. Only the male characters are represented as those who are engaged in important social activities like organizing the protests against the colonial administrations. Women are represented as the subordinates and are not given any vital roles in the society. Okonkwo's exile and his life for seven years during exile are clearly portrayed. The desperate state of his psychological state during exile is vividly represented by the novelist. But, the sufferings of the women and children due to the exile of the family do not occupy any considerable space in the novel. When Okonkwo commits suicide, three women turn widows and become isolated. There is no allusion to how their life would be after the death of Okonkwo. In other words, the novel, *Things Fall Apart* silences the very voice of women.

Apart from being oppressed under the usual stigma of ethnicity, race etc., the women are supplemented with the inferiority caused by the negative attributes of their gender too. As far as a black woman is concerned (for example, the wives of Okonkwo), she has to wear the burden of the marginalization and humiliation caused by both of their race and gender. But the males only suffer the racial discriminations and the consequent violations perpetrated by the dominant groups. So, women have to face an added or double oppression both from the male community and from the colonizers. “The notion of 'double colonization' -i.e. women in formerly colonized societies were doubly colonized by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies- became a catch-phrase of post colonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s” (Oyewumi 233). In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's wives are severely beaten by Okonkwo. Apart from that, they also are the scapegoats of the cultural transitions caused by the colonial invasion and occupations.

As indicated above, beating Okonkwo's wife is naturalized and internalized by herself. But, another serious issue is that it cannot be sidelined as a mere instance of a strained relationship between a husband and wife. Moreover, these kinds of tortures upon women are naturalized by the social system they are part of. Though there is a council of elders in Umuofia to discuss serious issues and to make judgment of them, they are not ready to deal with these issues. What is more, they elevate the figures like Okonkwo even without castigating or warning him for his beating of his wife. So, Even though it happens at domestic level, it is obvious inequality of the genders known to the public. Okonkwo is only a representative figure of these inequalities deliberately unnoticed by the concerned social and cultural authority. Kirsten Holst Peterson in his *First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature* says that, “my sense of humor has always stopped short at the pleasant little joke about Okonkwo being punished, not for beating his wife, but for beating her during the week of peace” (Peterson 237). Here, the offence done against the woman is given less significance than that done at a particular time. So, if it is not a week of peace, the act of beating is

not gravely taken into consideration.

In the process of colonization, the colonizers differentiate native males and females. This differentiation is the very nature and structure of the Western culture. The colonizers target the native males to introduce their policy of maximum exploitation of the natural resources, indigenous culture, and women community, the native males being primarily targeted by them are provided with maximum privileges. Yet, the colonizers have had a power to control them to act in tune with their policy. In *Things Fall Apart*, Mr. Smith appoints Okeke from the clan as his translator for his convenient communication. The outcasts of the clan, the zealous and vigorous young men like Enoch are the primary targets of the colonial missionaries to humiliate the traditional belief systems in Umoufia. When Enoch kills a python which is considered to be the sacred being, the White men provide all the support to him so as to spread the violence leading to the fishing in troubled waters. The white men organize a group of the young native males called Kotma from the Umoufia clan to treat the prisoners from the same clan. So, the women don't come to the picture at all in their colonial projects and policies. So, "the colonizers differentiated between male and female bodies and acted accordingly...in the colonial situation, there was a hierarchy of four, not two, categories. Beginning at the top, these were: men (European), women (European), native (African men), and Other (African women). Native women occupied the residual and unspecified category of the Other" (Oyewumi 256).

In a feminist criticism, giving voice to the women's expressions silenced by the patriarchal communities is significant as well as inevitable. Here, Spivak's *Can Subaltern Speak?* is noteworthy. According to Spivak, Subalterns' voices are not heard. Third world women under the constant exploitation come under the category of subalterns. When *Things Fall Apart* is analyzed, the notion of 'voice' itself is problematized. In *Things Fall Apart*, there is a reference to the women's voice being unheard at the death of Ezeudu. "The wailing of the women would not be heard beyond the village, but the ekwe carried the news to all the nine villages and even beyond" (TFA 109). Though it is natural that, men's lamentations too produced from a particular place are not audible in the neighboring nine villages, it is the women who are specified here. The woman's voice at the death place points to the two fallacies. Firstly, they are too emotional (i.e. they are not intellectual and rational), and secondly they are psychologically weak. In the same page of the novel, Achebe mentions her physical infirmity through the reference to the voice they produce at the death of Ezeudu by terming their voice as debilitated and 'faint'. The situation is depicted as "the faint and the distant wailing of women settled like sediment of sorrow on the earth. Now and again a full-chested lamentation rose above the wailing whenever a man came into the place of death" (TFA 109). Justin D. Edwards' *Post Colonial Literature: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* discusses the problems of voice and silence in detail. He says that "Pauline Ada Uwakweh argues (in her article on the novel, *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga) that 'silence is used as a patriarchal weapon of control'. She further explains how 'voicing is self-defining, liberational, and cathartic'....." (Uwakweh 103).

But, silence is not a permanent solution for the third world native women though it is a kind of resistance as is seen in Sasi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. If she does not speak for herself against injustice and oppression, it is natural that the existing patriarchal system will not deal with her specific issues. It is evident from the position as given below,

However, the native woman who remains silent also runs the risk of being spoken for by the other, so silence can lead to appropriation. This is because the multiple positions of marginalization (woman, native, other) will then be overwritten and spoken for by non-native men and women with their own agendas. In this situation, the issues surrounding the native women are potentially erased by the dominant discourses of patriarchy or the counter-discourses of white Western feminism" (T. Minh-ha 105).

The socially constructed rules and regulations from the andocentric point of view and the negative representations of the women in the literary circles are significantly portrayed in the novel. By the way of silencing the voice of the women, their marginalization is facilitated. Women's roles are determined by men, and if a woman transgresses the line drawn by the male centered society, she is considered to be unfit to the so called normal codes and disciplines of the entire society. Even the government and political leaders who are supposed to act against injustice and discrimination in the society seem be indifferent towards the oppression of women.

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