

Reading as a Woman: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Feminist Criticism

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Does "reading as a woman" change one's perspective on a text? Can a woman read as a woman after being conditioned, generally, to read as a man? In his *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*, Jonathan Culler (1982) addresses these issues and forms several interesting conclusions. What does it mean to read as a woman? Culler's answer is brief and relatively problematic: "to read as a woman is to avoid reading as a man, to identify the specific defenses and distortions of male readings and provide correctives".¹ Though Culler fails to outline these defenses and distortions, he does provide some fundamental guidelines for such a reading. Accordingly, to read as a woman requires that one approach a work from a feminist vantage and therefore, not regard the work from the purview of patriarchy. Consequently, in order to read Chinua Achebe's 1969 literary masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart*, as a woman, one must query readings which suggest that Okonkwo is the only major figure in the novel, and alternately analyze the motivations of principal female characters who are thoroughly developed within the work.²

Before beginning this feminist analysis, we must review the historical and cultural context in which *Things Fall Apart* was written. *Things Fall Apart*, first published in 1958, was initially written as a response to colonialist representations of Africa and Africans in literature, specifically Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1989).³ Cary's work positions Africans in the typical colonialist frame: as individuals without motives, forethought, or knowledge other than base responses to their environs. As JanMohammed (1986) states, "colonial literature is an exploration of a world at the boundaries of civilization; a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification." It is a world perceived as "uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil."⁴ Against this context, Achebe's novel allowed European readers to perceive Africans through an alternate lens. The Igbo society described by Achebe has definitive and complex social systems, values and traditions. Achebe presents customs such as the abandonment of multiple birth babies, and the sacrifice of human beings as conventions and not barbaric, inhumane rituals. He brilliantly places his characters within an ancient civilization with a labyrinthine system of governance and laws.

Consequently, Achebe's main character, Okonkwo emerges early in the text as a traditional hero, who has within himself the ability to languish or attain his goals. Achebe's readers understand that European colonialists do not precipitate Okonkwo's ultimate downfall. Instead, it is Okonkwo's seeds of self-destruction, which are deeply concealed in his desire to be the antitheses of his "feminine" father.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v5/v5i2a2.pdf>

Moreover, though Achebe's text is written in English, the language of the colonizer, it remains authentically African: "Achebe is most successful in expressing his African experience in English and still preserving its African authenticity."⁵ The actions, ethos, and characterizations in the text depict a culture in transition, with indigenous practices which may be perceived as untenable to foreigners, but which are ordinary accepted within. Even when certain members of the community seek refuge in the Christian church, it is most often because they find themselves casualties of specific cultural norms: women who have multiple births, albinos, etc...rather than those who are secure in the traditional world.

In addition, as Iyasere (1969) states, reading Achebe's conventional world as a woman, one cannot merely ascribe to the view that "one of Achebe's great achievements is his ability to keep alive our sympathy for Okonkwo despite the moral revulsion from some of his violent, inhuman acts."⁶ Instead, query whether this sympathy may remain intact for those reading through a feminist lens. Although many critics explicate upon the horrors and injustices Okonkwo inflicts upon the men in his life, (mainly his son Nwoye, his other 'son' Ikemefuna), most omit any discussion of the abuse suffered by Okonkwo's wives. However, this critique reevaluates the significance of not only the pain of these women, but also their importance as individuals within their community. Therefore, "by providing a different point of departure (this feminist reading) brings into focus the identification of male critics with one character and permits the analysis of male misreadings."⁷ Hence, this work challenges these misreadings and positions the female characters at the center of the text. Instead of focusing on Okonkwo, as most critics have, this reading is focused on two major female characters, Ekwefi and Ezinma, and one minor figure, Ojiugo. They are mentioned only briefly, if at all, by other critics of the text, and when referred to, are examined only in relation to Okonkwo's actions or motivations. Reading this text as a woman, this author analyzes these characters according to their self-perceptions, as well as societal awareness of them as women, wives, mothers and daughters. Exploring the relationships between these women reveals not only alliances between mothers and their offspring, but also alliances between comrades in arms.

The characterization of Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, almost seems insignificant to one reading from a patriarchal standpoint, but when reevaluated, one will find that she is a well of knowledge, love, and fierce independence. Ekwefi has endured much heartache and stigmatism. In *Things Fall Apart* (1969), women are viewed mainly as child bearers and help mates for their husbands. Due to the phallogocentric notion that women must produce many hardy, male progenies to be valued within their cultural milieu, Ekwefi is considered a cursed woman because after ten live births, only one child - a daughter-survives. Thus, "By the time Onwumbiko was born, Ekwefi was a very bitter woman."⁸ Accordingly, she resents the good fortune of the first wife: her ability to produce healthy, strong male children. Conversely, Culler (1982) asserts, "criticism based on the presumption of continuity between the readers' experience and a woman's experience and on a concern with the images of women is likely to become most forceful as a critique of phallogocentric assumptions that govern literary works."⁹ The conventional perspective of most readings of this text is that Ekwefi has been debilitated by life's harsh circumstances. However, instead of continuing to lament her adversity, Ekwefi devotes her time and energy to the one child who does live, and finds solace in her relationship with her daughter.

While male readings indicate that "the man is the point of reference in this society" Palmer (1983) stresses that as child bearers, women are pivotal to the literal survival of community and societal norms.¹⁰ After the death of her second child, it is Okonkwo, not Ekwefi, who consults the dibia to locate the source of her difficulty. It is also Okonkwo who confers with yet another dibia after the death of Ekwefi's third child, highlighting Palmer's contention that Ekwefi has failed, not because she cannot have a viable child, but because she cannot provide her husband with male progeny who would, then, carry on in his father's name. Okonkwo is concerned about the deaths of the children, but impervious to Ekwefi's privation. No one comforts Ekwefi as she is forced to watch the dibia mutilate her child, drag him through the streets by his ankles, and finally lay him to rest in the Evil Forest with other obanje children and outcasts. It is significant, though that Okonkwo does demonstrate concern for the female child, Ezinma, as he follows her into the forest after she is taken by the Priestess, Chielo.

Moreover, most readings of the novel do not address the brutal beating Ekwefi receives at the hands of Okonkwo: "Who killed this banana tree?" He asked. A hush fell over the compound immediately . . . Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping."¹¹ The novel continues with a brief discussion of this continued abuse later when Okonkwo threatens Ekwefi with a gun after hearing her murmur under her breath. Yet, the next day, the New Yam Festival continues without a public outcry for this battered woman. Reading as a woman, one may understand Ekwefi's resignation, as she recalls how she came to be Okonkwo's second wife:

"Many years ago when she was the village beauty Okonkwo had won her heart by throwing the Cat in the greatest contest within living memory. She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her bride-price. But a few years later she ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo."¹²

Culler (1982) writes that "women's experience, many feminist critics claims, will lead them to value works differently from their male counterparts, who may regard the problems women characteristically encounter as of limited interest."¹³ Therefore, although a male critic may deem these events as minor instances, the feminist reader must note that there is, in these passages, a great sense of irony and regret. Preparing to attend her favorite pastime, the annual wrestling event, Ekwefi recollects her great love for the then impoverished Okonkwo. Although she was married to another man, Ekwefi's desire for Okonkwo is so great that at the first opportunity she abandons her husband to be with him, yet a sound beating is the compensation she receives for her love and devotion. Although this brutality does not warrant any attention from the elders, Okonkwo's flogging of his youngest wife, Ojiugo, does. There is a public outcry, not because of the physical battering, but, rather the timing of the occurrence - The Week of Peace: "You have committed a great evil'...It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. Even the oldest men could only remember one or two other occasions somewhere in the dim past."¹⁴ Iyasere (1969) notes "the peace of the tribe as a whole takes precedence over personal considerations."¹⁵ He could have continued, elaborating that particularly in reference to women, the unanimity of the patriarchy is the main priority of the community, rather than the physical safety of its women.

Furthermore, there is no regard from the elders about Ojiugo's condition; to the contrary, one elder boldly asserts that she is at fault, and thus, the beating itself is not the point of

contention. Moreover, because Ekwefi is beaten after this week, there is no outrage beyond the intercession of the other two wives who dare say in support of their wounded sister, "It is enough."¹⁶ Communal events merely continue as normal. The great fight is fought, and new wrestling heroes are born. One may also wonder if while reflecting upon her life, Ekwefi is pondering the life of another young woman who has just decided that the new wrestling hero will become her husband, and the possible ramifications of such a decision. However, since Ojiugo is battered during the sacred week, Okonkwo must make a sacrifice to the earth goddess to recompense for himself and the community, which may be punished because of his dishonorable deed.

Culler (1982) notes that one strategy in the attempt to read as a woman is to "take an author's ideas seriously when . . . they wish to be taken seriously."¹⁷ If one is to take *Things Fall Apart* seriously, one must question a society that has no compassion for the brutality that is omnipresent in the lives of Okonkwo's wives. The reader must also question the patriarchal notion that devalues women so much that their feelings are not significant. There is, moreover, no week or even day of peace for the women of Umuofia. They cannot find sanctuary within the confines of their own homes, or in the arms of their own husbands.

There is one woman, or young girl who elicits pure love from all the lives she touches, even her father, Okonkwo. However, he cannot fully appreciate Ezinma as a person. Instead of admiring her for her strength and disposition as a burgeoning woman, Okonkwo is saddened by the fact that she is not male.

Ezinma is Ekwefi's only living child, and it is demonstrated that her father does in fact respect her character. When Okonkwo acknowledges these affections, a male reading may solicit a sense of alliance with him and wish, for his sake, that Ezinma were male: "She should have been a boy, he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter . . . If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit."¹⁸ Reading the text from the male purview, one may empathize with Okonkwo who, because of the fates, has no child, except a daughter, worthy of conveying familial legacies. But because Ezinma is female, she cannot function in this capacity. Moreover, even a woman, in a traditional reading of the text would support this notion. Culler (1982) articulates that "what feminists ignore or deny at their peril . . . is that women share men's anti-female feelings--usually in a mitigated form, but deeply nevertheless." According to Culler this stems partly from the fact that women "have been steeped in self-derogatory societal stereotypes," while being constantly "pitted against each other for the favors of the reigning sex . . ."¹⁹ While reading as a woman, one must acknowledge that women are also indoctrinated to envision the world from a patriarchal perspective, and that, in Ezinma's case, one must revise these biases to appreciate her strength, singularity and vivacity.

Initially believed to be an obanje child who had only come to stay for a short period, after Ezinma thrives, she is pampered by her mother, and as the child who would be king if she were male. Ezinma is the embodiment of all the women in this novel represent: intelligence, vitality, and fortitude. Even in her relationship with her mother, Ezinma exhibits what Okonkwo, through his phallogocentric lens, perceives as masculine tendencies:

"Ezinma did not call her mother Nne like all children. She called her by her name, Ekwefi, as her father and other grown-up people did. The relationship between them was not only that

of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals, which was strengthened by such little conspiracies as eating eggs in the bedroom."²⁰

Ezinma calls her mother by her name, signifying the development of an autonomous, effectual being. Ezinma and Ekwefi share a bond that is unlike most other parental ties in the novel: they are virtually equals. Their affiliation is based on mutual love, respect, and understanding. They share secret moments, such as eating eggs in the confines of her bedroom (eggs are considered a delicacy), solidifying their esprit de corps, even after Okonkwo threatens them both. Culler (1982) notes that when analyzing one's position as a female reader, "Critics identify (the) fear that female solidarity threatens male dominance and the male character."²¹ Thus, this maternal connection becomes a caveat for Okonkwo and traditional society because he cannot control the depths of love and the shared enthusiasm between mother and daughter. This is most evident when, for example, Okonkwo forbids Ekwefi to leave her hut after Ezinma is carried off by the chief priestess. Ekwefi ignores her husband and risks a flogging to follow Chielo and her daughter throughout the night, until she is certain that her daughter will return home safely. When Okonkwo asks, "Where are you going?" Ekwefi boldly asserts that she is following Chielo.²² But instead of attempting to detain her, Okonkwo joins the journey, following from a safe distance, also to ensure the safety of his beloved child. This mother/daughter alliance is explicated throughout the text, though there is little discussion of it in most analyses of the novel.

One must acknowledge as well that male and female roles are societal constructs, and thus, the entire female identity is based more upon societal constraints rather than physiological realities. Women are taught to mother, while men are conditioned to dominate and control. Hence, we know that men may also read as women, if they are willing to rethink their positions, as well as women's positions within patriarchal constructs. Culler (1982) writes "For a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or an experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct..."²³

As this constructed woman reader analyzes the characters of Ekwefi, Ojiugo, and Ezinma as major figures whose lives are not just affected by the whims of their father/husband, but also as women who affect their husband/father and each other, I believe that only when one consciously attempts to read as a woman, these formerly peripheral characters may be afforded proper critical attention by male/female readers of this great African novel.

Notes

1. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 54.
2. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969.
3. Cary, Joyce. *Mister Johnson*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989.
4. JanMohammed, Abdul. *The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature*. "Race," Writing and Difference. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986. p.83.
5. Obiechina, Emmanuel N. *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature*. Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1990. p. 57.

6. Iyasere, Solomon. "Narrative Techniques in Things Fall Apart". *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. Ed. Killam, G.D. London: Heyman, 1969. p. 98.
7. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 55.
8. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. p. 76.
9. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 46.
10. Palmer, Eustace. *The Feminine Point of View in Buchi Emecheta's The Joy of Motherhood*. *African Literature Today*. Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983. p. 40.
11. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. p. 39.
12. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. p. 40.
13. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 45.
14. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. Pp. 32-33.
15. Iyasere, Solomon. "Narrative Techniques in Things Fall Apart". *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*. Ed. Killam, G.D. London: Heyman, 1969. p. 94.
16. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969.
17. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p.47.
18. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. Pp. 61-63.
19. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p.53.
20. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. p. 73.
21. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 54.
22. Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1969. p. 97.
23. Culler, Jonathan. *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982. p. 64.

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