

# Shifting the Canon: An Analysis of Achebe's Women in *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*

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## Abstract

This paper analyses the image of women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah* to bring into focus on the shifting of the canon through Achebe's depiction of female characters in the two novels. The study focuses on some of the evil practices against the freedom of women, in the Igbo society, as reflected in *Things Fall Apart* and then contrasts with the positive image of women as reflected in *Anthills of the Savannah*. While the citizens, in general, and women, in particular, are ignorant in *Things Fall Apart*, written in the colonial period; they are, both, educated in *Anthills of the Savannah*, written in the postcolonial period. As findings, this study foregrounds the dynamism of the Igbo society, which allows Achebe, as a writer, to overcome prejudice and make obvious his quest for a once lost female identity. For instance, In *Anthills of the Savannah* and through Beatrice, Achebe presents the rise of new Nigerian women who are truly as active as men. Thus, for any meaningful development in our societies, the relevance of women must be taken into consideration. Otherwise, we will all end up like the Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*. Finally, in analyzing the position of women in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, the researcher draws on postcolonial criticism to enable the readers to uncover its contribution to create a society without discrimination.

## Keywords

Achebe, Female Empowerment, Gender Equality

## 1. Introduction

I am currently a PhD Candidate conducting a research on African Literature,

basically Feminist Aesthetics, with the final outcome of presenting women as subject not object. This is because women are valuable individuals capable to participate to the transformation of the African societies if the yokes of culture and traditions are removed. In the literatures, these yokes are made visible through the depiction of female characters by male writers.

To mention but few, just to keep the paper within reasonable limit, for instance, the female characters, in *Things Fall Apart*, are marginal characters, without real identities. Nnolim (2009: p. 151) observes that: “there is no happy marriages in Achebe, no soft and romantic moments between husbands and their wives, no intimate family counsels involving a father, his wife and children...”. Achebe is not alone in depicting women as weak, dependent and narrow minded. Davies (1986), in analyzing AyiKwei Armah’s novel of socio political criticism: *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968), points out that Armah’s female characters are either lovers, wives or blood relatives of the central male characters. The above view by Davies (1986) aligns with Usman (2006: p. 157) who observes that Armah presents women, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, as “greedy, mysterious, mad, selfish and above all narrow minded”.

However, my aspiration of writing this paper on the above mentioned topic stems after reading Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. In fact, one can easily label Achebe as a sexist writer if one only reads *Things Fall Apart*. Later, the reading of *Anthills of the Savannah* proves not only that the Igbo society is dynamic, but also and mainly that Achebe, himself, has gone through some transformation due, certainly, to time and circumstances, to depict women with positive outlooks in his subsequent novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. This paper, hence, explores the shifting of the canon through an analysis of Achebe’s women in *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Finally, the paper not only gives the reader an idea that no condition is permanent but also and mainly that both men and women are needed for a better transformation of the African continent.

## 2. Contextual and Conceptual Background to the Study

Learning on scholars such as Terry Eagleton, Edward Said, and Vladimir Propp, Darah (2008: p. xvii) foregrounds his presentation with the affirmation that “the literature of every community reflects in its totality the values and counter-values that characterize that community in a given period”. That is, what one writes and how one writes depends, certainly, on circumstances surrounding him or her; or else depends upon the ideologies of that time. As a result, in order to fully understand the “shifting of the canon” by Achebe in his depiction of women from *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is important to look into the history of each novel which leads to its publication.

In fact, when Achebe was born in 1930, it was not long after the British assumed direct control of Nigeria. At times, Achebe’s parents abandoned their traditional religion and converted to Christianity; while his grandparents re-

mained firm believers in their traditional culture. The white men established not only their religion (Christianity) but they also established schools and Mass media which are agents of cultural transmissions (Ayayi, 2005). For Lame (2013: p. 4): “Before Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, all the novels that had been written about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans”. Not only that Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* are the misrepresentation of Africa; but, also and mainly, they are too humiliating to the African people. For Lame (2013: p. 4) “Achebe’s primary purpose of writing the novel [*Things Fall Apart*] is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African”.

As for *Anthills of the Savannah*, it was first written and published in 1987. From publishing *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 to *Anthills of the Savannah* in 1987, there is an age gap of about thirty years old. So, times and circumstances have certainly shaped Achebe’s mind in a way he goes through some transformation to depict women positively in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The relationship to time is known to the Viennese novelist, Robert (1980: p. 3) who writes that: “The time was on the move... But in those days no one knew what it was moving toward. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what was below, between what was moving forward and what backwards”. This new relationship to time, certainly, pervades Achebe’s writing at the turn of the twentieth century.

After independence, we witnessed a new vision of writings. Most African writers began to observe and mainly examine their environment with regards to what Africans are doing with the independence they received from the colonizers. For instance, while Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* attacked the odds of colonialism; his novel: *Anthills of the Savannah* is directed toward the African leaders and Africans who have been destroying the cherished African mores by imitating Western Values. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, he examines the socio cultural and political realities of the time and attempts to put things right, through his writings. This is because, as said earlier, literary texts are produced under certain historical, social, cultural and even political circumstances and they tend to reflect these circumstances.

In fact, African literature in essence and origin is tied with historical, cultural and societal circumstances (Reddy, 1994). As such, creative writers often represent both their individual experiences and the collective experiences of their societies in their writings. Thus, Chinua Achebe is not only concerned with the image of Africa as viewed by Westerners, or with what Africans; but also his writings reflect the position of African women and basically Igbo women in both *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. For instance, his depiction of Igbo women, in *Things Fall Apart*, is degrading and sexist. Nnolim (2009: p. 151) observes that: “there is no happy marriages in Achebe, no soft and romantic moments between husbands and their wives, no intimate family counsels involving a father, his wife and children...”. Women are called after their hus-

bands and, often, sons. Okonkwo's first wife's name is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. She is alluded as "Nwoye's mother" (Achebe, 1965: p. 11). The same with Oberika's wife who is called "Akuke's mother" (Achebe, 1965: p. 49).

As opposed to what precedes, Achebe's depiction of women in *Anthills of the Savannah* is appreciated as we learn from his own view and as well as others' view. In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), speaking through Ikem, a journalist and a writer, Achebe acknowledges that the problem of the African party is due to excluding women from the center of interests. Hence, the shifting of the canon. However, in depicting women as weak and "second class citizen", in *Things Fall Apart*, we are tempted to ask whether Achebe was influenced by Colonialism or by his own Igbo traditions and culture? Certainly, an overview of some conceptual analysis can help reflect the stand.

In fact, though gender and its attendant problems began longtime in Europe and America, it is not too long that the gender awareness, in literary discourse, came into focus in Africa. Among the writings, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958 is a precursor to gender awareness through his depiction of African women as weak. Achebe, with the publication of his first major novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has emerged as the doyen of modern African writers in English. It has been acclaimed by the world as a classic in modern African writing, and is a worthy archetype of the novel which shows the tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe. However, according to Jones, Eustace, & Marjori (1987: p. 15), there is endless debate on either the culture of the subjugation of women came with the white colonialists or it is inherent in African societies; she later observes that Nwapa and Aidoo hold the view that it derives from the white men. For Jones, Eustace, & Marjori (1987: p. 11), colonialism and imperialism have greatly affected the life of women and their historical destinies. In other words, the subjugation finds root in the history of the western democratic traditions that have influenced African writers through colonial education.

In fact, the ancient Greek civilization and thoughts accorded to women a place just above the slaves who were normally regarded as chattels and commodities. For instance, Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, in his deductive analysis, confers citizenship of a state to only men, who contribute meaningfully to its well-being. In his opinion, women were not fit citizens of the state as their contribution to the growth of the society is of negligible importance.

What is more, in the African situation; the colonial experience is said to reinforce the patriarchal values that discriminate against women. In fact, there is no doubt, the first African writers to achieve prominence were men due to the fact that the patriarchal colonial institutions favored the selection of men for formal education (Davies, 1986: p. 2). Ernest (2006: p. 84) views as well that during colonial period: "men served as assistants in the colonial offices, interpreters in the courts, workers in the churches, while women were condemned to domestic chores and featured only as shadowy beings that served the sexual and other needs of the man".

Also, though most of those who served as teachers during colonial time were missionaries, what was taught to Africans was sometimes more of the Western male dominated culture than the teaching of Christ. For Umeh (1998: p. 281), “Christian missionaries educated men and women differently, producing inherent contradictions affecting relations between men and women...”. Ayayi (2005: p. 400) observes that not only schools and religions are agents of cultural transmission, but also and mainly that colonialism in Africa was, basically, done through “the introduction of the European Ways of doing things”. According to Ayayi, the colonialists along with their socio political and cultural impositions are responsible for the feminine subjugation since schools, religions, Mass media are agents of cultural transmissions (Ayayi, 2005).

Also, Upon acknowledging Ayayi (2005: p. 41) who says that: “By now, it should be obvious to us that colonial institutions, which we are all still running, can only produce a colonial mentality”; it is then , not surprising, that in the literatures by men, the masculine is regarded as a model while the feminine is subjected to man. As a result, following the comments by Ayayi (2005), we can deduce that Achebe’s depiction of female characters is nothing more than the manifestation of colonial constraints regulating the lives of men and women.

However, for some scholars, Africans have their traditions, customs, religion and ways of settling problems far before the coming of Europeans. For Killam (1973: p. 8) “African people did not hear of culture the first time from Europeans”. This message is already enclosed in the title of the novel: *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, Achebe describes the falling apart of the African culture or much specifically the Igbo culture. For Njoku (1984: p. 23), “*Things Fall Apart* expresses the author’s nostalgia for the traditions and beliefs of Igbos before European colonialism. It paints out that Africans in general had a high level of value system before the advent of Christianity”. The truth of the matter is a kind that when Christopher Columbus set out on his quest for riches and landed upon the shores of America in 1492, he thought he had found a new world. Contrary to this, an old world, certainly with different world views, was already in existence thousands of years prior to Columbus’ arrival (Taylor & Sturtevant, 1996; Zimmerman, 2003). As a result, Lame (2013: p. 5) is right when he states that: “In the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the history of Igbo; he does so by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made them different from Western cultures. For example, their beliefs in the power of ancestral gods, the sacrifice of young boys, the killing of twins and the oppression of women to name a few”. However, after, tentatively, giving the contextual and conceptual background to the study, and before we engage into the discussions, it is important to give an overview of postcolonial theory.

### 3. An Overview of Postcolonial Theory

Most critics give the definition of colonialism prior to defining the term post

colonialism. This is because the two terms are historically interrelated though they contextually produce counter values. Colonialism as defined by Loomba (2007: p. 8) refers to “the conquest and control of other people’s land and goods”. Colonialism, also, expresses the ethnocentric belief that the morals and values of the colonizer are superior to those of the colonized. Such belief was programmatically achieved through the establishment of schools by designing curricula which shaped to achieve the goals of the colonizer rather than train the colonized to be independent. Therefore, post-colonialism is sometimes assumed to be anta colonialism.

Abrams (2005: p. 236) defines postcolonialism as “the critical analysis of the history, culture, literature and modes of discourses that are specific to the former colonies of England, Spain, France and other European imperial powers”. It may also deal with literature written in or by citizens of colonizing countries that takes colonies or their peoples as its subject matter. In short, the theory is based around the concepts of otherness and resistance. In other words, the theory investigates what happens when two visions clash and one of them, with its accessory ideology, empowers and deems itself superior to the other.

However, it is not questionable that colonial rule was an imposition and it affected African culture with the immediate consequence of the introduction of such values as individualism, corruption, capitalism and oppression. What is more, women are even marginalized twice: as colonized individuals and as women. Thus, as one of the most important tasks of this modern time is that of finding arrangement by which women who differ with men either in race, religion, gender, educational and political outlook may live in peace and contribute to each other’s prosperity. This task is not essentially different from that which faced Achebe in writing *Things Fall Apart* and challenging the colonialists’ view of Africa.

To be much specific and relate the analysis to the context based study and as well as knowing that oppression is a basic ingredient of Colonialism; Post colonialism, here, is an analysis of a text through a specific critical lens. It is about what happened to women in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, written in the Colonial Period, that Achebe, himself, seeks to redress in *Anthills of the Savannah*, written in the Postcolonial period. Therefore, using Postcolonial Theory is the best way to find out how some male writers, like Achebe, try to redefine the new female identity. That is, Achebe’s development and construction of female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* not only contrast with the depiction of female characters in *Things Fall Apart* but also and mainly Achebe, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, makes obvious his quest for a once lost female identity. As a result, we can rightly apply the post colonialist theory in analyzing Achebe’s women in *Things Fall Apart* and in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

#### **4. The Image of Women in *Things Fall Apart***

*Things Fall Apart* is acclaimed to be a response to the Eurocentric description of

Africa. It is a reaction against the way Europeans view Africa and its people. However, the novel also teaches us about the marginal position of women in the Igbo society. The entire story of *Things Fall Apart* revolves, only, around men's society. Dathorne (1975: p. 69) states that *Things Fall Apart* is "essentially... infused by the dominant presence of a man...". Women are marginalized and the relationship between men and women are fixed by set of rules and norms. Women usually have domestically oriented jobs and complimentary positions to men. For instance, women are expected only to cook, to clean the house, to look after the children... For Umeh (1998: p. 162): "recent feminist readings of Achebe are discovering that the author's attempts to put past history in proper perspective resulted in a masculinist literary creation in which the self is male and the other female". As a result, and following Umeh's comments, Achebe, through *Things Fall Apart*, can rightly be described as a sexist male writer in his depiction of women as dependent, disparaged or prostitutes (Nnolim, 2009).

Thus, Achebe's depiction of women, in *Things Fall Apart*, is not without consequence to the society at large because women are not given their due considerations. They are often beaten for mere misconduct. At least, there are three instances of wife beating in *Things Fall Apart*. The first instance is when Okonkwo beats his wife, Ojiugo, because she was too negligent. At another time Okonkwo beats his second wife, Ekwefi, for allegedly killing his banana tree by cutting "a few leaves off it to wrap some food" (Achebe, 1965: p. 27). Thus, Okonkwo gets angry at her and says: "Who killed this banana tree? ... Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping". What is more, "Neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond an occasional and tentative, 'It is enough, Okonkwo', pleaded from a reasonable distance" (Achebe, 1965: p. 27).

According to Dathorne (1975: p. 67), just for removing a few leaves of the banana tree to cover food, Okonkwo attempts even to kill Ekwefi: "He [Okonkwo] shoots at his second wife [Ekwefi] and almost kills her". It is not quite surprising when we know that Okonkwo is not "the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for the fear of a goddess" (Achebe, 1965: p. 21). Keith (1998: p. 73) points out that "Okonkwo's domination of his household thus becomes a microcosm of the domination of the society as a whole by patriarchal figures". Also, in the novel, Okonkwo's neighbor, Mgbafo is tortured by her husband, Uzowulu, even when she is pregnant. Odukwue, Mgbafo's brother, reports: "My sister lived with him [Uzowulu] for nine years. During these years no single day passed in the sky without his beating the woman... when she was pregnant, he beats her until she miscarried" (Achebe, 1965: p. 65). It proves the harshness did not happen only in Okonkwo's life or families, but in all of Umuofia's community life. What is worth mentioning, here, is that Achebe, as a writer, fails to present the wives lamenting for their misfortunes or crying for justice as if nothing happened.

Also, one of the traditions in *Things Fall Apart* is polygamy. Okoye, Okonk-

wo's neighbor has three wives. Okonkwo has, also, three wives. Nwakibie, the rich man in Okonkwo's village has nine wives. What is good to point out is that, in the process of polygamy, women are used as mere commodities. In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwakibie is described as "a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who [has] three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children" (Achebe, 1965: p. 13). Moreover, Okonkwo's third wife is merely numbered as part of his acquisitions at the end of the first chapter: "Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife" (Achebe, 1965: p. 6).

*Things Fall Apart* leaves little room for the projection of feminine values. Okonkwo reacts to his son Nwoye who prefers his mother's stories of the "tortoise and its wily ways and of the bird" to his father's "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (Achebe, 1965: p. 37) gives a hint to men and women relationship. Often, women are silenced by tradition. When Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna home, he does not take time to explain to his wife Ikemefuna's whereabouts and ask her opinion on the matter; instead, he responds harshly to his wife in the following terms: "Do what you are told, woman" (Achebe, 1965: p. 10). Women's domination by men is taken for granted so as "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man" (Achebe, 1965: p. 37). That is certainly why, to be equated with a woman is one of the greatest insult an Igbo man can receive. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo suffers intense shame when, as a boy, a playmate calls his father an "agbala" meaning a woman.

Accordingly, Nnolim (2009: p. 151), analyzing *Things Fall Apart*, observes that: "there is no happy marriages in Achebe, no soft and romantic moments between husbands and their wives, no intimate family counsels involving a father, his wife and children...". However, it is good to acknowledge that, in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Achebe, due to the dynamism of the Igbo society and circumstances, shifted the cannon to depicting self-assertive female characters.

## 5. The Image of Women in *Anthills of the Savannah*

As stated earlier, the Viennese novelist Robert (1980: p. 3) writes: "The time was on the move... But in those days no one knew what it was moving toward. Nor could anyone quite distinguish between what was above and what was below, between what was moving forward and what backwards". This new relationship to time, certainly, pervades Achebe's writing at the turn of the twentieth century. There is a discernible change in the depiction of Achebe's female portraiture. In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), Beatrice is, most often, referred to as a very intelligent, assertive and philanthropic woman; images that Achebe hardly accords his previous female characters. According to Bicknell (1998), Beatrice, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, is not only articulate and independent but she is able to represent women's position. Mhindu (2014: p. 49) puts a seal that:



Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is another exceptional work of art that tries to elevate women. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice is endowed with the brains and beauty that makes her an admirable character for many. Achebe creates a Beatrice who has a first class Honors degree from Queen Mary College University of London. Thus, Achebe does not stereotype Beatrice as a brainless housewife as most patriarchal societies do.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice is called by her parents "Nwanyibuife" which means in Igbo language: "A female is also something": "But I must mention that in addition to Beatrice they had given me another name at my baptism, Nwanyibuife—A female is also something" (Achebe, 1988: p. 87). Such consideration contrasts with the context of *Things Fall Apart* whereby a female is, almost, nothing. In the novel, Achebe, also, empowers Beatrice with responsibility or positive outlook to the extent that she decides upon the name to be given to Elewa's baby. Culturally speaking, a baby's name is given by men. This proves if evidence is needed that Achebe tends towards a better depiction of women in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

What is more, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, speaking through his alter ego Ikem, a journalist and writer, Achebe brings women to the center of interest when he acknowledges that the malaise the African party is going through results from excluding women from the scheme of things. Beatrice, herself, rationalizes that: "It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late!" (Achebe, 1988: p. 92). Through Beatrice, Achebe is trying to demonstrate that what used to be system no longer is, and that women have proved to be capable intellectually, economically and politically.

Thanks to education, women have now widened their horizons. For example, Beatrice is not only well-educated with an Honors degree (she is the only person with such kind of a qualification in her community), but she also rises to the position of secretary which was rare for women to hold such position in her society. Thus, in the majority of the situations in which Beatrice is involved, she is the main agent of the processes, thereby projecting her as an active character. A situation which probably reflects the prominence that Achebe consciously gives to projecting the new role and status of the woman in the postcolonial African society.

Fonchingong (2006) rightly observes that the depiction of Beatrice, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, represents that of a woman carrying a flag of women's emancipation. Thus, African women are playing active and tremendous roles in their nations' histories by resisting temptation and by refusing to be relegated to the background. For instance, despite the fact that Beatrice is Chris's girlfriend, Major Sam, his Excellency, invited Beatrice to have sex with him, but Beatrice refuses to succumb to his advances. Beatrice seems to be a role model or an embodiment of successful women on whose sensibility the destiny of the entire nation is hinged.

In fact, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe depicts Beatrice as an epitome of an educated African woman who can rightly be considered as an embodiment of female success. Her ambitions and determinations to take active part in political and social affairs seem to prove that she is a type of woman on whom the destiny of the entire nation is posed. Beatrice gives her point of view on matters that concern women. For instance, she tells Ikem that his “thought were unclear and reactionary on the role of the modern women in our society” (Achebe, 1988: p. 97). She, later, manages to give Ikem an insight into the world of women which later enables Ikem to change his “reactionary” view on the role of modern women in the society. Ikem states: “Your charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression—how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear if it is to succeed again and again” (Achebe, 1988: p. 97).

## 6. Conclusion

In sum, I would like to note that my aim and focus is to explore the shifting of the Canon in the way Achebe depicts women as it is reflected in *Things Fall Apart* and in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The analysis proves if evidence is needed that despite the impact of colonialism on Achebe, despite the Igbo cultural norms or culture regulations, despite the clash of cultures between Eurocentric world view and Afrocentric world view; the Igbo society is not a static society. It is a very dynamic society. The aim of the paper is not only to prove that no condition is permanent, but also it aims at educating and mobilizing both men and women to look for a better future through better consideration of one another. In other words, it is another effort at educating and soliciting the collaboration of the global community in the fight against discrimination. Finally, Postcolonial criticism, which is mainly assumed to be anta domination in its larger sense, is relevant for the analysis of Achebe’s novels namely *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

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