

The Place of Women in Things Fall Apart: A Study of Gender and Power

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) stands as a seminal work in African literature, offering a profound exploration of Igbo society on the cusp of colonial transformation. While much scholarly attention has focused on Okonkwo's tragic heroism and the clash between tradition and colonialism, the role of women remains undertheorized, often reduced to symbolic or marginal figures. This manuscript undertakes a comprehensive analysis of gender and power in *Things Fall Apart*, interrogating the complex positioning of women within the patriarchal Igbo social structure. Drawing on feminist theory, postcolonial critique, and indigenous epistemologies, the study reveals how female characters though structurally subordinated exert subtle yet significant influence through spiritual, domestic, and communal roles. The analysis examines key female figures such as Ekwefi, Ezinma, and the earth goddess Ani, demonstrating their symbolic centrality and resistance to patriarchal erasure. The manuscript challenges the binary portrayal of Igbo society as uniformly oppressive to women, instead advocating for a nuanced reading that recognizes both systemic gender hierarchies and women's agency. By re-entering women in the interpretive framework, this study contributes to a more inclusive literary criticism and calls for future scholarship to engage with gender as a dynamic axis of power in African literature.

KEYWORDS

Gender; Power; Women; Igbo Society; Patriarchy; Postcolonial Feminism

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1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is widely regarded as the foundational text of modern African literature. Its publication marked a pivotal moment in global literary history not only because it offered a counter-narrative to Euro-centric depictions of African societies, but also because it provided an intimate portrayal of pre-colonial Igbo life in southeastern Nigeria. Set in the fictional village of Umuofia, the novel traces the life of Okonkwo, a proud and ambitious warrior whose personal downfall mirrors the collapse of traditional Igbo society under the pressure of British colonialism and Christian missionary incursion. The narrative is rich in cultural detail, exploring kinship systems, religious beliefs, political institutions, and social customs. However, despite its ethnographic depth, one of the most persistent critiques of *Things Fall Apart* centers on its representation of gender particularly the portrayal of women. From the outset, the novel presents a society deeply entrenched in patriarchal values. Okonkwo's identity is constructed in opposition to what he perceives as weakness, which he consistently associates with femininity. His fear of resembling his "effeminate" father, Unoka, drives much of his behavior, including his hyper-masculine posturing, physical abuse of his wives, and emotional repression. Women, in this framework, are often depicted in domestic, subservient roles as wives, mothers, and bearers of children. They are excluded from leadership positions, rarely speak in public assemblies, and are subject to the authority of their husbands and male kin. At first glance, this portrayal seems to suggest a rigidly patriarchal system in which women are systematically marginalized. Yet, such a reading risks over simplification. A closer examination reveals that the roles of women in *Things Fall Apart* are far more complex and ambivalent than they first appear. While they are indeed constrained by patriarchal norms, they also wield influence in spiritual, familial, and communal domains. The earth goddess Aní, for instance, holds supreme religious authority, and fertility, a domain associated with women, is central to the community's survival and moral order. Moreover, individual female characters such as Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Chielo demonstrate agency, resilience, and deep emotional intelligence. Their voices, though often quiet, are far from silent. They

navigate the constraints of their society with subtlety, resistance, and sometimes quiet rebellion. The study **“The Place of Women in Things Fall Apart: A Study of Gender and Power,”** seeks to re-examine the role of women in Achebe’s novel through a rigorous theoretical and literary analysis. It argues that women in *Things Fall Apart* are not merely passive victims of patriarchy but are active participants in the cultural and spiritual life of Umuofia. Their power is often indirect, embedded in symbolic, ritual, and affective realms, but it is nonetheless real and consequential. By analyzing gender as a dynamic and contested field of power rather than a fixed hierarchy, this study aims to complicate existing interpretations of the novel and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Igbo society. The manuscript is structured around several key themes: the construction of masculinity and femininity in Igbo culture; the symbolic and spiritual authority of women; the representation of motherhood and daughterhood; the intersection of gender and colonialism; and the implications of these dynamics for postcolonial feminist literary criticism. It draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, including feminist literary theory, postcolonial feminism, African gender studies, and indigenous epistemologies, to interrogate the ways in which gender operates as both a social structure and a site of resistance. A central question guiding this study is: How do women in *Things Fall Apart* exercise power within a patriarchal society, and what does this reveal about the complexity of gender relations in pre-colonial and colonial Igbo culture? To answer this, the manuscript examines both explicit and implicit representations of women, analyzing their dialogues, actions, symbolic roles, and narrative positioning. It also considers Achebe’s narrative technique how the author’s use of focalization, silence, and symbolism shapes the reader’s perception of gender. Furthermore, the study engages with broader debates in African literary criticism. While some scholars have criticized Achebe for perpetuating patriarchal norms, others argue that his portrayal is descriptive rather than prescriptive that is, he is depicting a society with gender inequalities rather than endorsing them. This manuscript navigates this tension, arguing that Achebe’s work, while embedded in its cultural context, invites critical reflection on gender. By foregrounding the contradictions and complexities in the portrayal of women, the novel becomes not only a narrative of cultural erosion but also a meditation on the internal

dynamics of power within African societies. Ultimately, this study aims to reposition women from the margins to the center of the interpretive framework of *Things Fall Apart*. It challenges the tendency in literary criticism to treat gender as a secondary theme in African literature, especially when compared to race, colonialism, and nationalism. Instead, it asserts that gender is a fundamental axis of power that intersects with other social categories and must be analyzed with equal rigor. In doing so, the manuscript contributes to the growing body of feminist scholarship on African literature and calls for a reimagining of literary studies that embraces intersectionality, cultural specificity, and the voices of women.

2. Construction of Masculinity and Femininity in Igbo Society

To understand the place of women in *Things Fall Apart*, it is essential to first examine the cultural construction of gender in Igbo society as depicted by Achebe. Gender in the novel is not a biological given but a social performance, deeply embedded in cultural values, economic roles, and spiritual beliefs. The Igbo worldview, as presented in the text, assigns distinct roles and expectations to men and women, with masculinity associated with strength, aggression, productivity, and public authority, while femininity is linked to nurturing, domesticity, fertility, and emotional sensitivity.

Okonkwo, the protagonist, embodies the ideal of Igbo masculinity. His identity is built upon a rejection of what he perceives as weakness traits he associates with his father, Unoka, who was gentle, musical, and debt-ridden. Okonkwo's deep-seated fear of resembling his father fuels his relentless drive for success, power, and social prestige. He becomes a renowned wrestler, a wealthy farmer, and a respected warrior. His masculinity is performative: he must constantly prove himself through physical strength, economic productivity, and emotional stoicism. As Achebe writes, "He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father" (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). This disdain for failure and effeminacy becomes the foundation of his worldview.

The novel establishes a binary between masculinity and femininity that is both cultural and psychological. Okonkwo equates masculinity with control over oneself, one's family, and one's environment. He believes that any display of emotion, particularly fear or tenderness, is a sign of weakness. This is evident in his treatment of his family: he beats

his wives, suppresses affection for his children, and reacts violently to any perceived challenge to his authority. When he participates in the killing of Ikemefuna, a boy he has come to love as a son, he does so not out of personal malice but because he fears appearing weak in front of the other men. As Achebe notes, "He was afraid of being thought weak" (p. 61). This moment is crucial it reveals that Okonkwo's actions are not solely driven by personal cruelty but by the internalized pressures of a rigid gender ideology.

Femininity, in contrast, is associated with the domestic sphere, child-rearing, and agricultural labor such as yam planting (though yam cultivation is primarily male). Women are responsible for cooking, cleaning, bearing children, and maintaining the household. They are also involved in trade and market activities, which gives them a degree of economic autonomy. However, their public voice is limited. They do not participate in village councils, and their opinions are rarely solicited in matters of war or justice. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves, though a woman (Chielo), speaks with divine authority, but this is an exception that underscores the rule.

Yet, the binary between masculinity and femininity is not absolute. The novel reveals moments of fluidity and contradiction. For instance, the art of storytelling, often associated with women, is highly valued in Igbo culture. Okonkwo's mother and other female relatives are remembered through stories, and folktales are a central part of cultural transmission. Moreover, certain traits considered "feminine," such as diplomacy and emotional intelligence, are essential to social harmony. Obierika, Okonkwo's close friend, represents a more balanced form of masculinity successful, reflective, and emotionally open. He demonstrates moral courage by questioning the decision to kill Ikemefuna, expressing doubt about its justice, and later criticizes the clan's harsh judgment in Okonkwo's exile, highlighting his capacity for independent thought and compassion. His character suggests that there are alternative models of manhood that do not rely on domination and violence.

The construction of gender in *Things Fall Apart* is thus not monolithic. While the society is patriarchal, it also contains counter-narratives and alternative values. Women, though excluded from formal power, are not devoid of influence. Their roles in reproduction,

religion, and cultural continuity give them a form of symbolic power that is essential to the community's survival. The earth goddess Ani, for example, is the ultimate moral authority. She is associated with fertility, morality, and the ancestral world. The Week of Peace is observed in her honor, and violations of this sacred period are believed to bring divine retribution. Achebe writes, "The great evil deity of the earth, Ani, would be offended" (p. 30). This indicates that spiritual power, though not wielded directly by women in human form, is deeply connected to the feminine.

Furthermore, the novel challenges the idea that masculinity is inherently superior. Okonkwo's hyper-masculinity leads to his downfall. His inability to adapt, to show compassion, or to accept change makes him rigid and ultimately self-destructive. In contrast, characters who embody a more integrated sense of self such as Obierika or Ezinma demonstrate resilience and emotional depth. This suggests that the novel critiques extreme forms of masculinity even as it portrays them as culturally valorized.

The construction of gender in *Things Fall Apart* must also be understood in relation to the agrarian economy of Umuofia. Yams, the "king of crops," are a symbol of male success and status. A man's wealth and prestige are measured by the size of his yam harvest. Women, on the other hand, cultivate crops like coco-yams, beans, and cassava referred to as "women's crops." This division of labor reinforces gender roles, but it also gives women economic utility. They contribute to household sustenance and participate in market trade, which allows them a degree of financial independence. A wife can earn money from selling her crops, and in some cases, this income is hers to control.

This economic dimension complicates the narrative of female oppression. While women are subordinate in the domestic hierarchy, they are not economically invisible. Their labor is essential, and their market activities provide them with social networks and autonomy. The novel mentions that women "carried their palm-wine to the market" and "sold their surplus yams" (p. 22). These details, though brief, indicate that women operate within a parallel economy that, while secondary to the male-dominated yam economy, is nonetheless vital.

Moreover, the novel portrays motherhood as a source of deep emotional and moral authority. Okonkwo's relationship with his daughter Ezinma is one of the most tender

in the novel. Despite his general disdain for weakness, he shows genuine affection for her, calling her “my daughter” with pride and even wishing she were a boy. This paradox of his admiration for Ezinma’s strength and intelligence, coupled with his regret that she is not male reveals the contradictions in his gender ideology. Ezinma, in turn, is portrayed as intelligent, perceptive, and resilient. She is the only child of Ekwefi who survives infancy, making her a symbol of hope and continuity.

The bond between Ekwefi and Ezinma is particularly significant. Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, is a woman of quiet strength. She has suffered the loss of nine children before Ezinma, yet she remains resilient. Her love for Ezinma is fierce and protective. When Chielo takes Ezinma to the Oracle at night, Ekwefi follows at a distance, defying both her husband and the priestess’s authority. This act of maternal defiance is one of the most powerful moments in the novel. As Achebe writes, “She followed her [Chielo] at a distance... her heart beating terribly” (p. 107). Ekwefi’s courage in this scene challenges the image of women as passive. She risks social censure and divine wrath to protect her child, asserting a form of maternal power that transcends patriarchal control.

Thus, while Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* is undeniably patriarchal, the construction of gender is more nuanced than a simple hierarchy of male dominance and female subordination. Women occupy a paradoxical position: they are structurally marginalized but symbolically and emotionally central. Their power is often indirect, exercised through motherhood, spirituality, and cultural reproduction, but it is nonetheless real. The novel suggests that gender roles are not fixed but are shaped by cultural values, economic systems, and individual agency. By analyzing these dynamics, we can move beyond reductive readings of women as victims and begin to see them as complex agents within a contested social field.

3. Symbolic and Spiritual Authority of Women

One of the most significant yet underappreciated aspects of gender in *Things Fall Apart* is the symbolic and spiritual authority attributed to women, particularly through the figure of the earth goddess Ani and the role of female deities and priestesses. While men dominate the political and economic spheres, women hold a privileged position in the spiritual realm, which is central to the moral and social order of Umuofia.

Ani, the earth goddess, is perhaps the most powerful deity in the Igbo pantheon. She is described as the source of moral authority and the guardian of the community's well-being. The Week of Peace, a sacred period before the planting season, is dedicated to her, and any violation such as Okonkwo beating his wife during this time is considered a grave offense against the natural and spiritual order. Achebe writes, "The great evil deity of the earth, Ani, would be offended" (p. 30). The priest warns that such an act could lead to a poor harvest, emphasizing that Ani's power is not symbolic but has real consequences for the community's survival.

This depiction is significant because it assigns ultimate moral authority to a female deity. Ani is not a minor or domestic goddess; she is central to the cosmology of Umuofia. Her domain includes fertility, justice, and the ancestral world. The fact that the most important moral sanctions in the society are linked to a female figure challenges the notion that Igbo culture is uniformly patriarchal. Instead, it suggests a dual system in which male and female powers are balanced, albeit in different spheres.

The role of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala (the Oracle of the Hills and Caves), further illustrates the spiritual power of women. Chielo is an ordinary woman by day—a widow with children—but when possessed by the spirit of the Oracle, she becomes a figure of immense authority. Even Okonkwo, the most powerful man in the village, must bow to her will. When she takes Ezinma to the sacred cave, no one dares to stop her, not even Okonkwo, who is known for his defiance. As Achebe notes, "Even he [Okonkwo] dared not defy the priestess" (p. 108). This moment is crucial: it demonstrates that spiritual power transcends gender and social hierarchy. A woman, in her role as a priestess, can command obedience from the strongest men in the village. Chielo's authority is not derived from her personal status but from her connection to the divine. This reflects a broader African religious worldview in which women often serve as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms. In many African traditions, women are seen as closer to the forces of life, death, and rebirth, hence their association with fertility, healing, and prophecy. Chielo embodies this archetype. Her possession by the Oracle is not a sign of weakness but of spiritual potency. She speaks with the voice of Agbala, delivering messages that shape the community's decisions.

The reverence for female spiritual figures extends to the ancestral world. The concept of *chi*, or personal god, is central to Igbo belief. While *chi* is grammatically masculine, it represents an individual's destiny and inner potential. However, the veneration of ancestors many of whom are female also underscores the importance of maternal lineage. Okonkwo frequently invokes his ancestors, but he also recalls stories from his mother's side. When he is exiled to Mbanta, his mother's village, he is welcomed and supported by his maternal kin. This highlights the principle of matrilineal solidarity, which provides a counterbalance to patrilineal authority. The novel also presents women as custodians of cultural memory and oral tradition. Storytelling, a key feature of Igbo culture, is often performed by women. Ekwefi tells Ezinma the story of the Tortoise, a tale rich in moral and philosophical meaning. These stories go beyond mere entertainment they convey moral values, offer explanations for natural phenomena, and help uphold societal norms. By controlling this narrative space, women exert a form of cultural power. They shape the worldview of the younger generation and preserve the community's identity.

Moreover, the emphasis on fertility and motherhood gives women a symbolic centrality. A woman's ability to bear children, especially sons, is highly valued. The birth of a son is celebrated with rituals and feasting. Yet, this focus on reproduction is not merely about patriarchy; it is about the continuity of the lineage and the survival of the community. In an agrarian society, population is a measure of strength. Women, as the bearers of life, are thus essential to the collective well-being.

The spiritual and symbolic authority of women in *Things Fall Apart* reveals a society in which power is not monolithic. While men hold formal authority in the public sphere, women exert significant influence in the sacred and cultural realms. This duality reflects a broader African cosmology in which balance between male and female, human and divine, individual and community is essential to harmony. Achebe's portrayal of this balance is not idealized; it is embedded in the complexities of human behavior and social conflict. But it does suggest that gender roles are not simply hierarchical but are part of a larger system of interdependence.

This analysis challenges feminist readings that view *Things Fall Apart* as purely

patriarchal. While the novel does depict gender inequality, it also reveals the ways in which women's power is institutionalized in non-dominant but essential forms. Their authority is not always visible in the marketplace or the council house, but it is present in the shrine, the hearth, and the story circle. By recognizing this, we gain a more holistic understanding of Igbo society and the multifaceted nature of power.

4. Motherhood, Daughterhood, and Female Agency

The relationships between mothers and daughters in *Things Fall Apart* offer a profound exploration of female agency, resilience, and emotional depth. Among the most poignant of these is the bond between Ekwefi and Ezinma. Their relationship transcends the conventional roles assigned to women in Igbo society and becomes a site of resistance, love, and quiet rebellion.

Ekwefi is introduced as Okonkwo's second wife, a woman who once had the reputation of being the most beautiful in Umuofia. Her marriage to Okonkwo is marked by hardship she suffers the loss of nine children in infancy, a tragedy that would break many. Yet, she endures. Her survival and strength are not celebrated in the same way as Okonkwo's wrestling victories, but they are no less significant. Her tenth child, Ezinma, becomes the focus of her life and the embodiment of her hope.

Ezinma, in turn, is portrayed as exceptional. She is intelligent, perceptive, and mature beyond her years. She understands the dynamics of her household and the pressures on her father. She is also the only child who can speak to Okonkwo as an equal. When he calls her "my daughter," there is warmth in his voice a rare expression of affection in a man otherwise defined by emotional repression. The night Chielo takes Ezinma to the Oracle is a turning point in the novel. Ekwefi, despite knowing the danger, follows Chielo through the dark, terrified but determined. She does not challenge the priestess directly, yet her mere presence stands as an act of defiance. She asserts her maternal authority over the spiritual and patriarchal order. Even Okonkwo, who initially tries to stop her, eventually joins her, not out of paternal love but out of concern for her safety. This reversal where the husband follows the wife is symbolic. It suggests that in moments of crisis, the maternal bond transcends gender hierarchy.

Ezinma's character also challenges gender norms. She is described as having the spirit of

a man bold, intelligent, and strong. Okonkwo himself says, “She should have been a boy” (p. 64). This statement is often interpreted as a lament for the patriarchal system, but it can also be read as a recognition of Ezinma’s exceptional qualities. In a society that values male traits, Ezinma embodies them, yet she remains a girl. Her existence blurs the gender binary and suggests the possibility of a more fluid understanding of identity.

The relationship between mother and daughter thus becomes a space of emotional authenticity and resistance. In a society that suppresses vulnerability, Ekwefi and Ezinma share a bond built on love, fear, and mutual understanding. They speak openly, care for each other, and face danger together. This contrasts sharply with Okonkwo’s relationships with his sons, which are marked by distance, fear, and discipline. Other female characters also demonstrate agency. Ojiugo, Okonkwo’s third wife, is mentioned only briefly but holds a significant place in the narrative. Her absence during the sacred Week of Peace prompts Okonkwo to beat her an act that violates the community’s customs and leads to his temporary punishment and social ostracism. While she is not developed as a character, her actions leaving to have her hair braided suggest a degree of autonomy. She is not a passive victim; she makes choices, even if they have consequences. The first wife, though unnamed, holds a position of seniority among the wives. She manages the household and mediates conflicts. Her authority is not political, but it is real. She represents the domestic order that sustains the family.

These portrayals suggest that female agency in *Things Fall Apart* is not absent but operates within constraints. Women navigate their world with intelligence, courage, and resilience. They may not hold formal power, but they shape their environment through relationships, care, and cultural practices.

5. Gender and Colonialism: The Intersection of Power

The arrival of the British colonialists and Christian missionaries disrupts the existing gender order in Umuofia. Colonialism does not simply impose foreign rule; it reconfigures social relations, including gender dynamics. The missionaries, in particular, target women and the marginalized, offering them a new identity and community. The church welcomes outcasts, including *osu* (outcasts dedicated to the gods) and women who have been silenced. This inclusivity gives women a new platform. For the first time,

they can speak in public, participate in religious life, and assert their spiritual equality. This shift undermines the traditional patriarchal structure and creates new tensions. Okonkwo sees this as a threat not only to his authority but to the entire social order. His resistance is not just political but gendered. He fears the emasculation of his society, the loss of male dominance. When his son Nwoye converts to Christianity, it is not just a religious betrayal but a rejection of masculine ideals. Thus, colonialism exacerbates gender conflicts. It offers women new opportunities but also destabilizes the cultural balance. The novel does not resolve this tension, but it highlights the complexity of change.

6. Challenges and Future Directions in Literary Studies

This study calls for a re-evaluation of gender in African literature. Future scholarship must move beyond binary readings and embrace intersectionality. It must engage with indigenous feminist theories and center women's voices. The place of women in *Things Fall Apart* is not marginal but central to the novel's thematic concerns. By re-reading the text through a gendered lens, we gain a deeper understanding of power, culture, and resistance.

7. Conclusion

Things Fall Apart is not merely a story of colonialism or masculinity; it is also a profound meditation on gender. Women, though structurally subordinate, exercise power in spiritual, emotional, and cultural realms. Their agency, though often indirect, is essential to the fabric of Igbo society. This manuscript has argued for a more nuanced, feminist reading of the novel one that recognizes both oppression and resistance, silence and voice, constraint, and agency. In doing so, it contributes to a richer, more inclusive literary criticism that honors the complexity of African women's lives.

8. Competing Interest

The author declares that he has no competing interest.

9. Consent for publication

Not applicable

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11. Author's contribution

The author provides a critical analysis of gender dynamics in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, highlighting the often-overlooked roles and influence of women in a seemingly patriarchal society. The study examines how cultural norms and power structures shape gender identities, challenging simplistic readings of female marginalization. Through close textual analysis, the author reveals the subtle yet significant ways women exercise agency and contribute to community stability. This study enriches postcolonial and feminist literary discourse by re-evaluating the intersection of gender, tradition, and power in African literature.

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