

WOES OF WOMEN IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

*This paper discusses the description of the woes of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe (1958) insofar as the three wives of the main character are concerned namely, Anasi, Ekwefi and Ojiugo. With the backdrop of Igbo society, the novel throws light on how women are kept at the periphery, made voiceless and oppressed due to the burden of patriarchy. The article explores the different forms of violence, mental (lunacy), physical and social, which define the lives of the wives of Okonkwo reveal the entrenched gender inequities found in the Nigerian culture. In line with Sylvia Walby (1990) work of *Theorizing Patriarchy*, the study particularly uses her dimension of violence as it pertains to the text. The results indicate that Achebe does not only demonstrate the deep-rooted patriarchal system of African society but shows the sufferings of women that, although they are the subject around which the family and culture revolve, are deprived of agency, dignity, and rights. By following the consequences of trauma, maltreatment, and social marginalization in the female characters presented in the works, this research paper will demonstrate how women suffering gender-based violence play a passive role in sustaining subordination whereas men remain dominant. The article makes a valuable contribution to the body of feminist literature to the extent that it provides voice to marginalized women by giving them opportunity to speak, as well as provides a critical reflection of the interrelation of literature, patriarchy, and gender-based verbal and physical violence.*

Keywords: Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), patriarchy, Sylvia Walby, violence, feminist criticism, gender inequality, women's oppression.

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) (1958) by Achebe is heralded by many to be one of the first written works in African literature, and most with the purpose of depicting a diversified Igbo culture, and the destructive nature of colonialism. Although much criticism concentrates on the cultural, political and historical use of the novel, much attention is still under discussion when it comes to the treatment of women by the novel. Achebe portrays women as mothers, wives, and carers but their voices are usually dampened in the patriarchal society that forms the backbone of the Igbo people. This poses critical concerns regarding life of women in the customary system of authority wherein it is difficult to smoothly address their struggle.

The images of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) cannot be taken out of the sphere of patriarchal system, which regulates all aspects of social and domestic life. Women are often victims of abuse, emotional starvation and blocked participation in decision-making circles. Indeed, it is always difficult to find an independent identity of women in the stories of Achebe as in most cases, they are depicted as peripheral human beings whose values are relative to those of men (Stratton, 1994). These depictions are a projection of cultural realities within most African societies as well as the culpability of literature in perpetrating the subordination of women. By analysing Achebe along the lines of feminism, not only do we clarify our current understanding of the text, but we also open ourselves to probing the generalities of a gendered subjugation ingrained in cultural custom.

To examine these questions, this paper uses the theory of patriarchal violence by Sylvia Walby (1990); according to this scholarship patriarchal violence identifies violence one of its six central structures of patriarchy. Walby explains that violence towards women is not only individual but systemic as cultural norms, institutional and power structure have been

legitimizing the dominant position of males. Such theoretical approach is especially effective when applied to the analysis of the work by Achebe, as it enables us to realize that the violence in the martial house of Okonkwo should not be viewed as a fine-grained issue of personal inclination or temper but rather as part of the greater value system that promotes the supremacy of males and subordination of women.

This research seeks to address the misfortune of females in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in terms of the theorization of violence as envisaged by Walby as a tool of criticizing patriarchal society in general and Achebe females in particular. Through the experiences of Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo, the literature clarifies how violence comes in various forms; physical, emotional, psychological and cultural domination that affect the lives of women in a manner that has not been advanced in the male-oriented literature. This study can be of use to postcolonial feminist theory because it brings out gender, culture, power issues in Achebe novel and also the endurance and the small voice of a woman to rise above oppressive systems.

1.1 Research Questions

1. How does Chinua Achebe portray the subjugation and suffering of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) through the experiences of Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo?
2. In what ways does Sylvia Walby's dimension of violence help in analyzing the different forms of patriarchal oppression depicted in the novel?
3. How does Achebe's narrative reflect both the cultural norms of Igbo society and the systemic marginalization of women within patriarchal structures?

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To examine the representation of women's woes and struggles in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), with particular focus on Okonkwo's wives.
2. To apply Sylvia Walby's theorization of violence as an analytical framework to understand how patriarchy perpetuates women's oppression in the text.
3. To highlight the broader cultural and feminist implications of Achebe's depiction of gender-based violence and women's marginalization in Igbo society.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it contributes to feminist literary criticism by revisiting Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) through the lens of Sylvia Walby's theorization of patriarchal violence. Although a fair amount of literature exists on the issues of colonialism and Igbo culture that are presented in the novel, not much literature has been devoted to the fact of systemic oppression of women in the novel. By focusing the examination on women- Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo, this study gives voice to a silenced woman who endures the harshness of patriarchy and lives on the fringe of Achebe narrative. In addition, the paper undertakes a new analysis since it incorporates the work of Walby, who argues that violence is not only an act of individual aggression but also the structure of patriarchal control. The strategy adds value to current literature because it reveals how the plight of women in the novel is representative of larger gender inequalities that are embedded in our culture. The work has important implications not only to literary professionals but also to gender researchers, studies in postcolonialism, and African culture researchers because it highlights the role of consciousness of gender, culture, and the aspect of power.

Lastly, the work can be relevant to the current time when the issue of patriarchal violence is still a burning problem on a global scale. The research can demonstrate the role of literature as the critical method of awareness of issues involving gender opposition and promoting women rights by drawing parallels between the fictional story by Achebe and the real-life gender-related issues that women face.

1.4 Delimitation

The present paper is thus scoped to assess Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart (1958)* (1958) with particular attention to the situations of three wives of Okonkwo, Anasi, Ekwefi and Ojiugo. Although other female characters as well as general representations of other cultures occur in the novel, this study will be limited to these three women as wives as that will enable it to carry a comprehensive analysis of women as victims of patriarchal violence. Moreover, the examination utilizes Sylvia Walby (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy* within a theory that focuses on the aspect of violence as its main line of explanation. Although other feminist approaches are used, they are not applied so as to ensure theoretical consistency. Moreover, this work does not aspire to be a complete socio-historical treatise on Igbo society; in a sense, it concentrates only on a textual analysis of Achebe as a literary treatment of the subject of patriarchal oppressions.

2. Literature Review

Later studies have gone on to question hierarchy of the male taken in the texts of Achebe especially in *Things Fall Apart (1958)*. According to Achebe (2020), Achebe asserts that he depicts the culture of the Igbo people with great admiration and respect but at the same time reveals the gender hierarchies that are deeply rooted in this very culture and pressurize females to the margins. In his opinion, Achebe portrays women as those who give care, bear children, and are subordinate people, which demonstrate the overall patriarchy typical of African society. This is consistent with the view by Walby (1990) of patriarchy as a system in which the subordination of women has been naturalized within the society and also in the domestic realm. Wakanma (2021) also points to the fact that a feminist re-reading of African text is required to bring out lost narratives of women. In her discussion, she claims that *Things Fall Apart (1958)* by Achebe has subtle yet strong information about the emotional and physical abuse that women have to go through. She substantiates that by re-reading classic African texts with a focus on feminism, such as the work of Walby, we can reveal how answers to the multiple oppressions of women in Africa are couched within the body of knowledge.

Another example of relating patriarchy to Nigerian society is given by Adeyemi and Akinola (2022), who use Walby dimensions to indicate that the role of violence in the studied culture is related not only to individual violence but to specific cultural practices as a tool of power. They point out similarities of the women in Achebe as perceived by Okonkwo and the Nigerian women of today that are subjected to domestic violence which is accepted as a part of culture. This study proves that violence in the narrative of Achebe is not a series of isolated events but an element of structure.

Ogunyemi (2021) invites the reader to explore the aspects of trauma in African literature and states that the women characters of *Things Fall Apart (1958)* depict generational trauma caused by a cultural tendency. The trauma endured by Ekwefi (the murder of her children) and Okonkwo beating Ojiugo as a part of the Week of Peace shows that female trauma is ignored, trivialized. The analysis demonstrates that the literature such as the one presented by Achebe can act like a reflection to the wounds the patriarchal traditions cause women without them seeing.

Chukwuma (2023) states that in the novel, Achebe highlights the paradoxical nature of the role of women in the Igbo society in that, although they play a pivotal role when it comes to the realization of cultural heritage and continuity of the family, they are not given any role to play or dignity. She states that the feminist theories, in particular, Walby has contributed to the process of showing the institutionalization of violence in family and communal lives. The paper also highlighted how the wives of Achebe are representative of a bigger picture in that the women are socially needed but politically submerged.

Balogun (2020) conducts comparative research and investigates the relation of the depiction of women in Achebe to the current debate about gender-based violence. Although it was published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart (1958)* still resonates with modern tendencies of marginalisation of women in the societies of Africa. The connection between the patriarchal model suggested by Walby and the roles of women in the novel depicted by Achebe allows the study to combine the concepts of literary criticism and feminist activism to make the novel sound alarmingly topical.

3. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative research design** rooted in textual analysis. Since the focus of the research is to explore how women's woes are represented in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart (1958)* through Sylvia Walby's dimension of violence, a qualitative approach is most appropriate. The method allows for an in-depth and critical engagement with the text, enabling the identification of patterns of gender-based oppression, symbolic representations of patriarchy, and the consequences of violence against women in Igbo society.

3.1 Tools for Data Collection

The primary tool for data collection is **close reading** of Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart (1958)*. Passages that highlight the experiences of women—particularly Okonkwo's wives (Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo)—are selected and analyzed thematically. Direct textual quotations serve as empirical data, which are then interpreted within the framework of Walby's feminist theory. Secondary data sources include **scholarly articles, books, and critical essays** on Achebe, feminist literary criticism, and Walby's patriarchy. These secondary sources contextualize and strengthen the analysis.

3.2 Sample

The sample is **purposive and textual**, limited to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart (1958)*. Within the novel, the study specifically focuses on the lives and experiences of Okonkwo's three wives—Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo—as they most vividly represent the forms of violence and oppression women endure in the Igbo society depicted by Achebe. While other female characters appear in the novel, these three provide a representative and manageable scope for examining how patriarchal violence is normalized.

3.3 Rationale

The rationale for this study lies in addressing a gap in Achebe scholarship. While *Things Fall Apart (1958)* has been extensively studied for its postcolonial themes and cultural depictions, less emphasis has been placed on examining the **systematic oppression of women** within the narrative through feminist frameworks. By applying Walby's dimension of violence, this study re-centers the experiences of Achebe's female characters and emphasizes how literature reflects patriarchal structures. Furthermore, the rationale extends to highlighting how Achebe's text, though historical and fictional, resonates with ongoing struggles of women in contemporary societies, thereby making the study both literarily and socially significant.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This is based on the theory of patriarchy especially in the dimension of violence given by Sylvia Walby (1990). Walby has conceptualized patriarchy as a system of social structures, practices where men dominate women, oppress and exploit women. In this context the violence is not interpreted to be isolated incidences but it becomes an institutionalized system of perpetrating violence by the patriarchy in order to sustain patriarchalism. Through the prism of this theoretical framework, the paper discusses how women are exposed to the damages of physical, psychological, and cultural violence further contributing to their oppression. An example is the beating of Ojiugo during the Week of Peace and Ekwefi who loses her children repeatedly, as they are part of the customs made to endure among a family and the rest of the society.

4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes the circumstances of women in the *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe (1958) in terms of the dimensions of patriarchy proposed by Sylvia Walby, or, more specifically, her dimension of violence. The novel by Achebe focuses on Okonkwo and the clash of culture between the Igbo culture and the encroachment by colonialism; however, the author also provides voice to the silenced/ marginalized women. The wives of Okonkwo Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo, are a combination of different realities of subordination, which are signs of patriarchal perseverance rooted in systemic violence.

According to Walby (1990), violence is an expression of power that reinforces the position of the subordination of the women and instills a sense of fear as well as the feeling of control. This definition also helps us to see how violence of various kinds including physical, psychological and social violence is encoded in the male dominance in Achebe. As the following analysis illustrates, the experiences of the wives of Okonkwo help to illustrate the issue of patriarchal oppression in Igbo culture and the lives that women endured.

4.2 Patriarchal Violence in Igbo Society

Achebe depicts Igbo society as one that reveres strength, aggression, and masculine authority. From the outset, Okonkwo's character embodies this ethos: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (Achebe, 1958, p. 3). His masculinity is equated with dominance, and women are subordinated by cultural norms that normalize their exclusion and suffering.

Walby (1990) notes that patriarchal violence is often normalized and institutionalized, making it appear natural or inevitable. This is evident when the village tolerates Okonkwo's beating of his wives, especially Ojiugo, as long as it does not occur during sacred periods. Violence against women is not condemned as immoral in itself but only when it disrupts religious custom. Achebe illustrates this contradiction through the narrator's remark: "And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace" (Achebe, 1958, p. 29).

This incident reflects how patriarchal systems condone violence against women as disciplinary and necessary, with transgressions judged not for the harm caused to women but for violating cultural rituals.

4.3 Physical Violence against Women

4.3.1 Ojiugo's Beating

The most explicit display of patriarchal violence is Okonkwo's beating of Ojiugo, his youngest wife. Ojiugo's "crime" is the neglect of her domestic duty—she fails to cook his meal. Achebe narrates:

"Okonkwo was provoked to justifiable anger by his youngest wife, who went to plait her hair at her friend's house and did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal" (Achebe, 1958, p. 29).

By labeling Okonkwo's anger as "justifiable," Achebe captures the cultural mindset where women's bodies are considered the rightful targets of male discipline. Walby's concept of patriarchal violence as a form of control is evident here—Ojiugo's body is punished as a reminder of her subordinate position.

4.3.2 Ekwefi and Threat of Death

Ekwefi also faces Okonkwo's wrath. During one confrontation, Okonkwo nearly kills her:

"And when she mocked him, he had just aimed at her with his gun. Fortunately, he did not hit her and she went away with the gun's empty threat hanging over her head" (Achebe, 1958, p. 39).

The act demonstrates how male anger can escalate to life-threatening violence. Walby emphasizes that patriarchal violence does not merely discipline but often terrorizes women, forcing them into compliance through fear. Ekwefi's survival underscores the precariousness of women's lives within a violent household.

4.4 Psychological and Emotional Violence

4.4.1 Ekwefi's Grief

Ekwefi's suffering is compounded by her repeated loss of children. The narrator explains: "Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy" (Achebe, 1958, p. 77).

Although her grief is profound, Igbo society regards these deaths as a reflection of her supposed weakness or misfortune rather than acknowledging her emotional pain. Walby's theory highlights that patriarchal systems often trivialize women's suffering, interpreting it as a failure of duty rather than a call for empathy.

4.4.2 Anasi's Humiliation

As the senior wife, Anasi should hold symbolic respect. Yet Achebe portrays her as overshadowed and ignored. When important ceremonies take place, Okonkwo does not honor her status, reinforcing her invisibility. This subtle dismissal is an example of psychological violence, where women's voices and identities are systematically diminished.

Achebe captures the silencing of women when he notes that at family meetings, "It was really not a man's affair. A woman had no business to take part in it" (Achebe, 1958, p. 84). This exclusion denies women agency, reducing them to voiceless figures despite their contributions to household stability.

4.5 Social and Cultural Violence

4.5.1 Exclusion from Decision-Making

Igbo society institutionalizes male dominance by excluding women from communal authority. Achebe notes:

"The elders and the titled men sat in a circle. It was not a meeting where every man in Umuofia could speak, but only the men of high title" (Achebe, 1958, p. 26).

By extension, women have no representation. Walby (1990) identifies this as structural violence, where women's absence from public decision-making ensures their subordination in both domestic and communal spheres.

4.5.2 Religious Subjugation

Women's strength, even when demonstrated, is reabsorbed into patriarchal culture. Ekwefi bravely follows Chielo, the priestess, when she takes her daughter Ezinma:

"Ekwefi followed the priestess without showing any sign of fear" (Achebe, 1958, p. 103).

Her maternal courage, however, is overshadowed by the authority of religious tradition, which validates Chielo's right to claim the child. Achebe shows how even women's resistance is constrained within cultural structures that privilege male-centered authority.

4.6 The Interplay of Patriarchy and Violence

The cases of Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo highlight that patriarchal violence in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is multifaceted. It manifests as physical aggression, emotional humiliation, and cultural exclusion. Walby (1990) explains that violence is not isolated but part of a broader system of domination. Achebe's portrayal of Okonkwo illustrates this: his obsession with masculinity and control perpetuates violence as both personal practice and cultural expectation. Most importantly, the ability of women to endure and withstand the hardships of life, the strength that Ekwefi, Anasi and Ojiugo demonstrated through their enduring nature, show the strength that women carry with them without talking about it. But they are not strong enough to destroy patriarchy; rather they operate within its limits.

4.7 Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe gives a detailed description of the distress of women during the time of the patriarchal Igbo community. The violence against women is embodied in the wives of Okonkwo—beating of Ojiugo signifies physical submissiveness, grief and near death of Ekwefi represent emotional and life-endangering abuse and neglect of Anasi means psychological and social invisibility. These accounts are taken as evidence of how violence has become a system of control to maintain male domination via Walby framework. Although the cultural conflict between before-colonization and after-colonization periods is central to Achebe, it is also clear that the author captures the suppressed and subordinate nature of females, thus revealing the price of male chauvinism on women.

5.1 Findings

An evaluation of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe in the dimensions of patriarchal violence formulated by Sylvia Walby allows us to draw some noteworthy conclusions concerning the portrayal of women and the structural character of their oppression in Igbo society:

1. Physical Violence as Male Authority

- Okonkwo's beatings of Ojiugo and Ekwefi demonstrate how violence is normalized as an instrument of male authority. For instance, when Ojiugo fails to prepare his meal, Achebe notes that Okonkwo "beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace" (Achebe, 1958, p. 29). This reflects Walby's argument that patriarchal violence legitimizes itself by treating women's disobedience as punishable.

2. Psychological Violence through Devaluation of Women's Emotions

- Ekwefi's repeated loss of children illustrates the silencing of female grief, as her suffering is depicted as part of her "fate" rather than an emotional reality deserving recognition. Achebe highlights this when he writes: "Ekwefi had suffered a good deal in her life. She had borne ten children and nine of them had died in infancy" (p. 77). Her personal trauma is treated as a burden she must silently endure.

3. Cultural Violence and Institutionalized Gender Roles

- Women are excluded from the public sphere and relegated to domesticity. Achebe reflects this in the Igbo proverb: "No matter how 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" (p. 37). This establishes violence and dominance as measures of masculinity, naturalizing women's subordination.

4. Humiliation and Emotional Neglect of Senior Wives

- Anasi, though the senior wife, is denied influence in the household. Achebe observes her position during communal feasts, where "the first wife had to be there to prepare her husband's feast" (p. 21), yet her authority is overshadowed by Okonkwo's dominance. This supports Walby's claim that patriarchal violence often works through emotional silencing and humiliation rather than physical force alone.

5. Violence as Structural and Systemic, Not Individual

- Achebe's narrative suggests that violence is not merely a reflection of Okonkwo's personal temperament but a systemic practice embedded in Igbo patriarchy. The constant reminders that women are "weak" and "second-class" members of society demonstrate how cultural norms sustain gendered subjugation beyond the domestic household.

6. Women's Resilience and Subtle Resistance

- Despite their subjugation, women occasionally demonstrate courage and agency.

The act of the woman who follows Chielo all night to safeguard Ezinma in opposition to patriarchal and religious dominance depicts mother against man: Thus, Ekwefi followed the priestess, who walked as though she were no more a human being but a shadow (p. 106). Although portraying this as extraordinary, this shows that up against violence, women are persevered.

All in all, the results correspond to the fact that Achebe gives a stratified representation of female sufferings, showing how the patriarchal violence, of a corporeal and mental nature, of cultural and institutional nature, defines women lives, and possibly pointing to how women resist it silently.

5.2 Conclusion

This paper explored the plights of women in *Things Fall Apart (1958)* by Chinua Achebe through the theorization of patriarchal violence by Sylvia Walby. The analysis has revealed that Achebe writes about women as the victims of a highly established patriarchal society that justifies the exercise of male power through violence, exclusion and cultural constraints. The three wives of Okonkwo-Anasi, Ekwefi, and Ojiugo, are used as a template of every Igbo woman because they are representative of their shared experiences as women.

In the study it was concluded that:

Violence in the novel by Achebe is many-fold: It is literally physical abuse, mental torture and emotional degradation, as well as cultural marginality.

Patriarchy in the Igbo society continues not only through individual men as exemplified in the life of Okonkwo, but also institutions, customs, traditions and social norms that make women subservient.

Although the plot of Achebe has repeatedly been accused of patriarchal connotations, it, in fact, reveals the pain of women marginalization, demonstrating their plight on a bigger scale and within a circumference of Africa and colonial transformation.

Women in the novel are not all that passive despite their oppression. Otherwise, complaisant characters like Ekwefi make strong stands of their own against the unquestionable power of patriarchy in deferential but important ways.

Upon such an analysis of *Things Fall Apart (1958)* in terms of Walby, the text is not merely an account of cultural contact and disruption of colonialism but also an account of gender connections. The novel highlights how the troubles of women lie at the core of both the Igbo society and the mechanism of patriarchal violence everywhere.

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