

Depiction of Female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*



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ABSTRACT: This study sought to investigate Achebe's ideological change from male-oriented view to feministic point of view. A significant number of critics argue that Chinua Achebe's earlier novels such as *Things Fall Apart* depict women as being passive in the society. This study, therefore presents a depiction female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*. The study is based on the premise that *A man of the people* reflects Chinua Achebe's change from traditional African Literature to modern fiction. The study was guided by one main objective; to examine shifts in depiction of Female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*. The study applied the critical feminist literary theory as propounded by McDowell (1995). The study was anchored on qualitative research methods.

Data analysis was done through qualitative analysis more specific interpretative and narration methods. Interpretive methods were use for the perusal of the two novels and a number of academic critical studies on different aspects of literary works. Narration methods were used to reveal information on issues on female gender. The findings of the study show that a positive shift from female gender from a patriarchal society to empowered women who contributes to sociopolitical society.

KEY WORDS: Female gender, Achebe, Power

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper expresses a shift in portrayal of women in Chinua Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*. Female characters in African novels have been portrayed in a variety of ways ranging from gender stereotypes to gender inequality. Stratton (1994) observes that female characters are portrayed as mothers who are confined within the home, but have the responsibility of taking care of their household and their husbands. Thus, the place of women is seen as the kitchen where they perform other kitchen chores. Klein and Ackerman (1995) hold the view that for many centuries African women were not only neglected, exploited, degenerated, but they were excluded and treated as outsiders and inferior to men; they were not included in any political affair.

The representation of female characters based on gender stereotypes is done so to demean their attempts to transcend this position are often questioned. In fact, Adebayo (1996) argues that females own attempt to cope with situations they find themselves in are regarded as a "problem" by men, and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women's roles. Consequently, African Literature depicts a male dominated society that is malecreated, male oriented and chauvinistic art (Adeleke, 1996). The text reveals a patriarchy structure that is a major feature of the traditional society (Asiyanbola, 2005). Such a society has clearly defined sex roles, while various taboos ensure conformity with specified gender roles. For instance in traditional society men do not participate in domestic work including child rearing – such tasks are considered to be the exclusive domain of women. The female gender on the other hand is usually 'depersonalized and socially constructed as secondary and subservient to the generic male gender' (Moreblessings, 2006). African literature presents female gender as the sexually domesticated being; a weak vessel whose duties are to produce children and prepare food for the family.

One of the known fathers of African Literature is Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe's novels have however been significantly criticized as anti-feminist. For instance, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) depicts a masculine literary work in which female characters are accorded a very low status. In this vain, the female gender is seen as subsidiary characters in this text and their good deeds are not recognized. In fact, in this text where female characters tend to outshine the male characters the female gender is demeaned. A good example is when Ezinma portrays a sense of brightness; Okonkwo always wishes she were a boy. Thus, the female characters are placed at subsidiary level.

Consequently, earlier novels of Chinua have thus been criticized for representing women as passive participants. Sumbul (2013) explores the Ibo Culture and the aspect of gender bias where he argues that women are relegated to an inferior position throughout the novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Rajesh (2014) argues that women in Achebe's earlier novels only appear as peripheral and lacking political consciousness. For example in analysis of *Things fall apart*, Rajesh argues that women in Achebe are only seen but

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not heard and that, patriarchy intervenes harshly into every sphere of existence as women only appear as peripheral and lacking political conscious. Hassan (2016) on the other hand argues that Chinua Achebe tends to belittle women substantially in addition to being very gendered-sarcastic as in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Hassan (2016) argues that Achebe belittles, scorns, and underestimates women in his early and modern novels. Collectively, these studies indicate the negative depiction of women characters in Achebe's novels. Foster & Nwiyor (2017) observes that generally Chinua Achebe's earlier novels, namely, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* are said to deliberately mortify women. In analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as anticolonial and anti-feminist novel, their study observes that Chinua depicts a patriarchal world that oppresses women in every sphere of its existence.

The current study is thus motivated by efforts made by Chinua Achebe in *A man of the people* (1966) to depict women positively. *A man of the people* is set during post-independence where Achebe has succeeded in making his work fictional and sound real as well. Moreover, in the text female characters are no longer subordinates as they have been portrayed in his earlier novels. Moreover, there was a general outcry that male authors need to make a concerted effort to change female character portrayal. Thus, *A Man of the People* portrays transformation in representation of female characters in African literature. Therefore, this study is set to depict social transformations of female gender in Chinua Achebe's *A man of the people* (1966).

This research is therefore saddled with one general quest:

To examine shifts in depiction of Female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*

The study explored how Achebe has portrayed the female gender positively in his recent text *A man of the people* (1966). This study therefore contributes to theory and practice of literary theory of feminism and the theme of social transformation. The study also makes a contribution to policy makers especially the government of Kenya through the ministry of sports youth and culture in formulating policies that curbs discriminations relating to gender roles, and violence against women and the girl child at large.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applied the feminist literary theory also known as Feminist literary criticism as propounded by McDowell (1995). Feminist literary criticism recognizes that literature both reflects and shapes stereotypes and other cultural assumptions. Thus, feminist literary criticism examines how works of literature embody patriarchal attitudes or undercut them, sometimes both happening within the same work. The feminism literary theory draws from a wide range of critical theories, including psychoanalysis, gender and anthropology. The main objective of this theory is to understand the position of females and gender conflict as a feature in literary works written by male writers. McDowell (1995) puts it rightly that the primary objective of feminist literary theory is to evaluate how the gender quotient affects all phases of human existence. This theory is applicable to the current study since it focuses on change on the social stratum and the reasons behind the condition of women in the contemporary world. The main tenet of this theory clearly shows the social rights for females and ways of omitting any disparities based on sex. Moreover, the issue of Feminism is based mainly on equality rights for females and seeks to assist them in finding an equal standing in their communities. Thus, the theory clearly shows new depiction of women in power and politics as depicted by Chinua Achebe in *A man of the people*.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study applied qualitative research design that utilizes in-depth methods of understanding social and cultural phenomena. A study on female gender concerns understanding people and the social cultural contexts within which they live, why people behave as they do: their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and fears. Moreover, qualitative approach is the best way for the interpretation and analysis of primary and secondary resources such as literary texts. Thus, analyzing the new shift of depiction of female gender in *A Man of people* entails the interpretation of some aspects of gender such as representation of women.

3.2 Research procedure

This research focuses on critical reading of Chinua Achebe's *A man of the People* and other related researches that have been done in this field before. The excerpts from the texts are analyzed within the framework of feminist literary theory that focuses on gender, feminism, womanism and psychoanalysis.

3.3 Data collection

Both primary and secondary data forms the basis of analysis. The researchers have also sourced relevant information from academic and public libraries that have provided significant sources of critical information.

3.4 Data analysis

The researcher used qualitative data analysis and specifically interpretive method. The interpretive analysis focuses on the nature of the perspectives that have had the greatest influence on the writings of male writers. Interpretive method of analysis deals mostly

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with texts. Since this study is an attempt to analyze positive depiction of female gender using the literary theory, the aspects of representation of women are focused on. Narration is also employed in the analysis of data to show portrayal of female gender in the text.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on analysis and interpretation of data on shift in depiction of Female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *A Man of the People*. The analysis is done with a close revisit of how Chinua Achebe presents gender and power in his earlier novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The researchers found it relevant to provide an overview of the representation of female gender in Achebe's earlier novel in order to enable the scholars to understand the change in the presentation of female gender and assumptions to involvement in formation of political parties, management prestigious schools by Chinua Achebe in his recent novel without necessarily making a comparison of his other novels.

4.1 A shift in representation of female gender in *A Man of the People*

Comparisons of Chinua's Achebe's earlier African Literature as symbolized by *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *A man of the people* (1966) reflect a change in his fiction work. Achebe's perception on female gender has gradually changed as symbolized by one of his latest novel *A man of the people* (1966) that depicts women positively. Achebe uses his persuasive skill and techniques to change the stereotype against female gender, through his only fictional novel *A man of the people* (1966). *A man of the people* is written during post-colonial era and it reflects Achebe's new feminist ideological turn that acknowledge how gender roles have been changing in the modern societies particularly in Africa. *A man of the people* reflects a positive reflection of women through female characters such as Edna, Elsie, Eunice and Mrs. Nanga. Both Elsie and Edna serve as objects of conquest for Chief Nanga and Odili, respectively.

In *Things Fall Apart*, men control every aspect in the society. For instance, female gender do not have any power to lead the family or any other structural institution or society at large based on the Igbo belief in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). For instance, Igbo-culture dictates that that female gender should not disturb social, economic and political matters. In this sense then male gender's influence is portrayed as significant in the chauvinistic society among the Igbo people where power and its structure is centered and bestowed to males who construct the identities of gender in the society. Lazy men in the society are thus referred to us *igbala* implying they are women in Igbo language and traditions and such people were not allowed any leadership role. A good example is Unoka and Nwoye who were perceived as being lazy and who enjoyed feminine things. This shows that women are represented as being lesser as compared to men. Okokwo on the other hand only arose to fame after wrestling and defeating Amalinze the Cat in a duel. This kind of power is structural and advantages men over women. For instance, by oguefi Ezeudu being a long time great fierce fighter during his youthful time he is currently respected in the clan (Achebe, 1958), p.47).

In *A man of the people*, Chapter one introduces the readers to "Ego Women's Party" whose main participants are women. The party is a reflection of women participation in political environments. Though the role is subsidiary women in the Anata society have been depicted as adding a vivacious quality to life in villages. The setting of this party reflects a political atmosphere before election as narrated by Odili. The people are waiting for a man of the people; Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P., who should arrive to address his people at the venue: the Anata Grammar School. Odili in chapter one narrates how events unfolds in this setting. Through vivid description he describes "Ego Women's Party" as

"...dancing groups were performing at different points in the compound. The popular 'Ego Women's Party'...in spite of the din you could still hear as clear as a bird the high-powered voice of their soloist, whom they admiringly nicknamed 'Grammar-phone'...you just had to listen whenever Grammar-phone sang." (1)

The above description clearly shows the role of women as being active rather than passive as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Women add quality of life-liveliness by participating in societal rituals, ceremonies or events which is appreciated. Odili confesses to loving 'Grammar-phone's singing though he doesn't care too much for the dancing. Chapter one thus clearly shows a shift of presentation of women from negative to positive. The presence of women in political meeting where female gender's presence varied from uneducated village women to influential business women serves as an acceptance of female gender in a chauvinistic society. Achebe's depiction of female gender on the first political meeting in the novel therefore represents the modern role of female gender in the society which liberates female gender from the marginalization and exclusion to house hold chores. The narrator Odili says:

"Five or six dancing groups were performing at different points in the compound" (Achebe, 1966, p.1). But, Achebe specified the group as "The popular 'Ego Women's Party'" (Achebe, 1966, p.1)

The presence of female gender in a political event show that women can now participate in important discussions and be involved in political affairs. Moreover, the mere fact of the presence of female gender at a political rally gathering serves as the beginning of women liberation from marginalization to inclusion.

Things Fall Apart also reflects marginalization of women politically that makes them to be even more oppressed and exploited. For example, in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), women suffer the fate of exploitation and marginalization throughout the entire novel as they

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are subjected to an inferior position throughout the novel. They are regarded as mere addition to men thus degrading their status and moreover, women are treated as possessions. Women in *Things fall Apart* have been denied a chance to participate in Key key decision making of the society as their place is only to educate their young ones by narrating narratives to them in addition to bringing up girls. Marginalization is clearly based on gender divisions and misconception of the patriarchy and this is particularly emulated through Okonkwo. For instance, in the text Okonkwo wishes that his favorite child, Enzima, should have been a boy. Moreover, Achebe places women on the peripheral due to masculinity especially on matters concerning power and politics of the society.

Achebe in *A man of the People* shows a shift of perception of women especially on matters concerning politics. In Chapter one Achebe introduces Mrs. Eleanor John, which introduces the reader to the new dynamics of perception of women. Odili introduces Mrs John as:

"an influential party woman from the coast who had come in the Minister's party." (14)

The above description clearly shows a shift in representation of women in terms of gender roles in the society. Women are now introduced Ministers rather than housekeepers as in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe has exhibited a paradigm shift in portrayal of female gender's role in the society by appreciating their full potential and their new role in the modern society. Mrs. John symbolizes the modern woman who is courageous, determined and thriving through all odds. Whoever, Mrs Johns description is demeaned by an extended description as shown below:

Mrs. John who apparently is "heavily painted and perfumed", who "smokes" and wore "massive coral beads" worth "hundreds of pounds" on her head.

A contrast is made to her of a "beautiful young girl"

who "looked as though they had stopped by some convent on their way and offered to give her a lift to the next one." (14)

The above excerpts clearly show different depiction of women in the society. Mrs. John owns a clothing empire like fellow men too which is all what stewanism is about. These traits of Mrs. John as an influential business woman gives a clear signal that Achebe's new role of modern female gender in the society female gender has proven themselves worth and equal to men in all spheres of life. Females like Mrs. John have successfully taken their rightful place in the society making important contributions to the economic growth of their countries. Moreover, Mrs. John's presence and role in the statutory boards within the Minister's portfolio can be seen as a social change of female gender and her presence signifies the voice of the voiceless female gender. It further implies that female gender is politically conscious and they have what it takes to be part of decision making boards where their views and concerns are heard. The aforementioned portrayal of female gender in power directly responds to the first objective of this study. Through Mrs. John, it can be argued that female gender in power is depicted as brave, resistant and successful. As much as women have been presented as being professional Achebe seem to be suggesting that they should be less attractive as juxtaposed by the girl's description. This is evidenced by the introduction of Barrister Mrs. Akilo who Odili expresses nonchalantly he feels will sleep with Chief Nanga, herself being more educated than him, and even married. Odili's description clearly shows that women have advanced in terms of Education. But unfortunately may still fall pray of a man.

Marginalization and limitation is also seen in the case when Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* restricts his daughter Enzima from doing 'heavy' work. As soon as she offers to bring a chair for him he replies,

"No, that is a boy's job." (Achebe, 1958, p. 32).

The above restriction by Okonkwo on his daughter Enzinma clearly portrays females being not only treated as subordinate to males and there exists specific gender roles well defined but they were also constantly reminded of their feminine existence and undoubtedly being confined to certain activities. This perception is clearly changed in *A man of the people* by Achebe uplifting the depiction of African female gender who he portrays as key generational model of change. For instance, Eunice in the text- *A Man of the People* (1966) portray Chinua's new female gender; depiction throughout the novel he question the postcolonial Nigerian politics of exclusion that collapsed public sphere and gender space that prevents good governance. Achebe has presented the female gender as pioneer to the definite change in novel, which draws much attention to these females. On the same note, the role of female gender in *A Man of the People* (1966) has drastically changed where Eunice, is depicted as politically sound; Eunice is one of the co-founder of the newly formed political party CPC an opposition party which intends to fight and replace the corrupt regime of Chief Nanga and his ilk. Eunice's depiction is a portrayal of female gender in revolutionary mission. Female gender is shown as politically conscious, brave, wise, and educated as Eunice stand man to man to male gender in the chauvinistic society, hence Chinua Achebe has expressed a paradigm shift where modern role of female gender inclusive in *A Man of the People* (1966). Jean on the other hand is an ambassador a female who is portrayed as a beautiful and self-assertive female. Jean and her husband are both ambassadors and they are dining with the minister of culture chief honorable M A Nanga. Although the couple had different personalities; they are both prudent in their duties.

"He seemed the quiet type and I thought, a little cowed by his beautiful, bumptious wife. But I had no doubt they were both in their different ways excellent ambassadors" (Achebe, 1966, p. 40).

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This implies that Jean's character contrast the expectation of the female gender in the olden days. She is proud, determined and independent. In summary, Jean as a female gender is living her life fully, while being a wife and a career woman, an excellent ambassador as argued earlier. Through Jean, Achebe presents female gender in power as influential and excellent candidates in their roles. It further shows that women can be both a wife and politically conscious.

Chinua Achebe's portrayal of female gender in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is shown as the objects of torture; they are neglected, reprimanded and beaten by their husbands. Surprisingly enough, female gender is also expected to endure domestic violence in the hands of their husbands. One noticeable abuse of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is when Okonkwo brutally beats his youngest wife ojiugo when she goes to plait her hair at a friend's house and fails to cook dinner for her children. As a result; Okonkwo's wives silently suffer quietly under his forceful and aggressive rule of the household. In a similar case, Okonkwo's second wife Ekwefi who after she cut a banana leaves to wrap some food and she said so she was given a sound beating and was left with her daughter weeping neither of the other wives dared to interfere beyond occasional tentative, 'it is enough Okonkwo pleaded from a reasonable distance.' Ekwefi murmurs something about Okonkwo's gun that has never killed anything. Okonkwo show no respect to a woman's life: 'the beaten wife had just been beaten murmurs of a gun which has never shot regrettably to her, Okonkwo crazily ran in his hut after hearing the statement for the loaded gun again ran and aimed at his wife as she haphazardly ran over the dwarf wall of the barn.

A loud report was heard after he pressed the trigger accompanied by mourning of his other wives and kids, jumped into the barn after throwing the gun down there laid the lady very much shaken' (Achebe, 1958, p. 28).

Preoccupied with masculinity is Okonkwo to the extent that his family, especially his wives suffer greatly at his hand. The significance of masculinity in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is dumbfounding to the extent that much of everything considered being feminine is despised.

A man of the people on the other hand reflects aggressive women. For instance, Eunice after her fiancé Max kulamu is killed, she is angered by the action hence she revenges by shooting and instantly killing Max's killer. Instead of screaming and crying which is a common norm of a female gender, Eunice does the contrary:

she opens her handbag as if to take out a handkerchief, takes out a pistol instead fires two bullets into Chief Koko's chest" (Achebe, 1966, p. 60).

Unlike the representation of women as being vulnerable and timid in *Things Fall Apart*; the act of revenge in *A man of the people* by Eunice is quite captivating encouraging and admirable. Being a female the society expects that she wails and scream, after seeing her future husband being killed but does the contrary. Eunice instead kills chief koko which symbolically imply doing away with the corrupt regime together with its officials in addition to revenging for the Max's killers.

A very strange girl, people said" (Achebe, 1966, p. 132).

The female gender is thus depicted as empowered and is politically sound. Eunice fearlessly engage males violently both physically and politically. Based on the above arguments about empowerment, Chinua Achebe has depicted female gender in the text *A Man of the People* (1966) as politically, culturally, socially and economically enlighten in addition to them being sound of what surrounds them for instance, in *A Man of the People* (1966). Achebe twisted the traditional belief about women by presenting Eunice as a strong, courageous and level headed woman. Eunice, before weeping as expected of her, acted very fast in avenging her fiancé's death by ambushing his murderer Chief Koko. Eunice's reaction to this violent incident proves Achebe's new portrayal of female gender.

Moreover, in *Things Fall Apart* women have been presented as being voiceless and they are supposed to endure their husbands' verbal and physical abuses and not question anything. Prominently, in his earlier novels, Achebe portrayed female gender as dependent on men's presence to make them complete. *A man of the people* on the other hand presents the reader to three most prominent women in the novel Edna, Elsie, and Mrs. Nanga. The three women have families and carriers. However, these women are blamed or made scapegoats for the unfortunate circumstances in which many of the men find themselves. As much as women have found empowerment through education they seem still to be suppressed. For instance, Edna is unable is passive about her engagement in spite being a woman of class. When Odili inquires about it Edna astutely replies that:

"This is the world of women" (69),

The above response shows the subjugation of women and pervasiveness in the society. A view that Eunice, Max wife is contesting against. Odili is able to observe the equality of her partnership and the way in which she wields her academic and professional power. While at a political event Eunice's attends as the only lady in the Common People's Convention. This then implies that female gender is strong and equally capable as men if not better. Eunice is portrayed as a beautiful, intelligent and confident barrister female gender. Her intelligence and posture has Intimidated men particularly Odili the narrator. It makes odili's masculinity to be threatened by a strong African woman. The above example provides evidence that the social status of female gender has changed

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from exclusion to inclusion. A man of people is an example of modern fiction that portrays the fundamental change of female gender's status in the society.

Things Fall Apart presents a society that applauds women marginalization that is passive with no role in politics. Traditionally women would be depicted at such gatherings as nothing but mere waitress and tending to the male guests, but in *A man of the people* Achebe portrays female gender contrary to traditional society, for instance, the dinner party is hosted by an influential and a political woman. On top of that, more females were present four women and three males present. *A man of the people* also depicts a society where female gender is depicted as politically sound and they are part and parcel of the public spheres. An example, is political and public sphere where female gender is part and parcel is when Mr. Nanga the Minister of Culture opened the book exhibition of works written by local writers. Predictably, different ambassadors were invited and attended the event in numbers.

“Mr. Jalio, why didn't you tell me that you are expecting ambassadors at this function? His eyes were still ranging over the parked cars, some of them carrying diplomatic number plates and two flying flags” (Achebe, 1966, p. 56).

Among the feared ambassadors by the Minister, is Jean, his and Odili's more than an acquaintance to put it frank. At the same platform Odili was accompanied by his girlfriend Elsie the nurse. Unlike in *Things Fall Apart* where women were seen as sexual objects, Elsie's presence at such a prestigious event indicates that she is more than just a lover to Odili who is now through the Minister well acquainted and connected to various political representations. This is a positive representation of female gender from an African novelist Achebe, through an African male Odili who is the narrator, shows that women are not only good for sexual pleasures as Odili and Elsie's relationship would imply but they can also serve as good company which is what all the stewanism is all about. Achebe has therefore empowered female gender in *A Man of the People* (1966) and he has on various cases involved female gender in politics, economy and social affairs of the community.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper was set to analyze depiction of Female gender in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* and *A man of the people*. The data analyzed shows a paradigm shift in representation of women from patriarchal society (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958) to feministic point of view as depicted in *A Man of the People* (1966). The results shows that in the novel, *A Man of the People* (1966), women are depicted as learned, powerful, brave, wise, political champion, professional, enterprising running clothing business, head teachers of reputable private institutions, statutory boards members, predominant in love relationships. The study, thus concludes that while *Things Fall Apart* represents women from traditional African ideology of gender, *A man of the people* blends traditional ideology with modernization and globalization as symbolized by women like Mrs. Eleanor John and Barrister Mrs. Akilo excelling through education. The traditional ideology in *Things Fall Apart* is also replicated in *A man of the people* as shown by African traditional women such as Edna and Mrs. Nanga. Thus, the study concludes that *A man of the people* is a fictional novel that perfectly shows a society that reflects social, political and economic growth and change in a real life society.

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