



**SUBJUGATION AND RESISTANCE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S  
THINGS FALL APART**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Things Fall Apart* is a 1958 English novel by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. In the novel, Achebe explicates the role of women in pre-colonial Africa. Women are relegated to an inferior position throughout the novel. Their position has been degraded. Gender separations are a misconception of the patriarchy. But Okonkwo trusts in traditional gender divisions. Okonkwo wishes that his favorite child, Enzima, should have been a boy. Okonkwo shouts at her, "Sit like a woman." (p,40). When she offers to bring a chair for him he replies, "No, that is a boy's job." (p,41). On the other hand, his son Nwoye was a disappointment to him because he has taken after his grandfather Unoka and has feelings of love and affection in him. For same reason Okonkwo had always resented his father Unoka also. Unoka was negligent. For him he was a failure oppression is a type of injustice.

Subjugation is the biased use of authority, law, or physical force to prevent others from being free or equal. It can mean to keep someone down in a social sense, such as an authoritarian government might do in an oppressive society. It can also mean to mentally burden someone, such as with the psychological weight of an oppressive idea. In a social justice context, oppression is what happens when people are pushed down by societies. It is the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner. It can also be defined as an act or instance of subjugating , the state of being subjugated , and the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions or people, and anxiety.

Resistance is likely to grow an inevitable consequence. However, resistance has various forms and can be offered consciously or unconsciously. Especially female victims of enslavement, discrimination or prejudice demonstrate resistance that seems to be the opposite of what is mostly connected with the term. Women, who do not fight conventionally, using violence, force or weapons. Rather do they develop their new, effective strategies and distinctive methods to oppose those subjugating mechanisms of slavery, patriarchy or racism they have been suffering from.



In this article, I have made an attempt to analyze the Igbo women's subjugation and resistance in the context of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe exposes the subtle processes of subjugation and gender differentiation operative within the institution of the family and the male-centered Igbo society at large. These include social and psychological factors such as, woman's subordinate position in the family and her restricted sexuality. The author seeks to expose the ideology by which a woman is trained to play her subservient role in society

Achebe is indebted to Yeats for the title as it has been taken from Yeats' poem *The Second Coming*. Achebe is a fastidious, skillful artist and garnered more critical attention than any other African writer. His reputation was soon established after his novel *Things Fall Apart*. He made a considerable influence over young African writers. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English. It seeks to discover the cultural zeitgeist of its society. Critics tend to agree that no African novelist writing in English has surpassed Achebe's achievement in *Things Fall Apart*. *Things Fall Apart* is a milestone in African literature. It is considered to be Achebe's magnum opus. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's sincere attempt to guide people in their struggle to make their freedom meaningful, functional and relevant. He is a committed writer who believes it is his duty to serve his society.

*Things Fall Apart* is an attempt to redeem the dignity of Africa. It is not a past to lament over. Achebe has maintained pathos and ethos of original language. He attempts to preserve the artistic world of the African past. He portrays the psychological problems of a generation of Africans suddenly superstitious without any reason and logic. In fact racists have labeled them as savage. And it was considered White Man's Burden to enlighten such ignorant people. Achebe reminds that Africa had a rich past and a legacy and that not only the whites have a right to have history and a rich past. The title implies that the center is weak and cannot hold. Cultures crumble and civilizations disintegrate in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel is set in a traditional Ibo village community at the turn of the century when the first European missionaries and administrative officials were beginning to encroach inland.

Okonkwo, protagonist is a leader of the Umuofia clan. He is a highly respected man in his village; the only problem he has to face is his son, Nwoye, who, in his father's eyes, is an idle and negligent young man of twelve years old. On the Week of Peace, Okonkwo breaks the "law" when he beats one of his wives, Ojiugo, because she was too negligent. This was the first case when he shocked his family and tribe. The Oracle makes a decision Okonkwo's "adopted son" has to be sacrificed. Okonkwo does not want to appear weak, he kills Ikemefuna with great cruelty. Nwoye, who had become great friends with Ikemefuna, grieves and is again afraid of Okonkwo, whom he could stand when Ikemefuna was around. At the funeral of the old clansman, Okonkwo's gun blows up and take the life of Ezeudu's son. Because of an accidental killing, he is exiled from the village for seven years. He goes to



Mbanta, the native village of Okonkwo's mother. Ezeudu's family destroys everything that was related to the ex-leader of the clan in order to purify the village of the sin. White missionaries arrive in Umuofia and Christianize the villagers. Nwoye also Christianizes. Seven years have passed and Okonkwo returns to his village where the missionaries have already converted most of the local people. When he returns after seven years he finds things have changed drastically. White missionaries have established themselves and some people of his village have converted to their religion. Okonkwo tries to rouse his clan to take action against these foreigners and their institutions. He was ready to stand for and fight for his community but others did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. Okonkwo's tragic mood indicates an affirmation of the validity of the past. And movement of the plot indicates acceptance of the present as it is.

*"Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women."* (Achebe 165).

In a rage he kills one of the white men and then in order to avoid the disgrace of being caught at the hands of white men he commits suicide. There is a contrast in the way he lived his life and in the way he faces death. His death marks that unchecked manliness complex may result in a disaster. When his kinsmen find his dead body they refuse to touch it and instead asks the white men to bury him. On being asked the reason one of them explains,

*"It is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it."* (Achebe 186).

There are constant struggles between gender, identity, commoditization, and class. Chinua Achebe wrote the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which is a great piece of African literature that deals with the Igbo culture, history, and the taking over of African lands by British colonization. The ongoing gender conflict is a prominent theme in *Things Fall Apart* presenting the clash between men and women of the African Igbo society. Throughout history, from the beginning of time to today, women have frequently been viewed as inferior, men's possessions whose sole purpose was to satisfy the men's needs. May be it's because men are physically stronger than women and have always had the ability to control them that way. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo women were perceived as being weak. The recurring theme of gender conflicts helps to drive the novel *Things Fall Apart* by showing how important women are to the men, yet they do not receive the treatment they deserve.

There are many cases in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which show that Igbo women are often beaten by their husbands because of little things that they do or because the men easily lose their tempers. The men punish women because they know that they will never fight back and



because it is acceptable in their culture. Okonkwo is a person who doesn't show any type of emotion except for anger. He believes other emotions symbolize weakest, therefore he uses his "heavy hands" as his strength towards people . Okonkwo allows his anger to take control at times, in one particular case his anger took over, was the "Week of peace". During the "Week of peace" also known as the sacred week, was the time before people started to plant crops. The "Week of peace" meant everyone was to live in peace to honor their goddess of the earth that will in turn bless, their crops to grow. Because of his anger Okonkwo broke "*the peace and was punished*" by the earth goddess Ezeani. He had broken the peace by beating his youngest wife Ojiugo with a passion. Ojiugo had went to get her hair done and didn't come back in time to cook lunch. Okonkwo continues to beat Ojiugo even after his other two wives begged him to stop beating her, after all it was '**sacred week**'. Another time Okonkwo displayed his anger was during "**The New Yam Festival**" when his second wife, Ekwefi, had cut a few leaves off of the banana tree to wrap food. Okonkwo gets angree 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*"(40) . He then left her to cry, however she made a comment and he pointed a gun to her:

*His anger thus satisfied, Okonkwo decided to go out hunting. He had an old rusty gun made by a clever blacksmith who had come to live in Umuofia long ago. But although Okonkwo was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact he had not killed a rat with his gun. And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clambered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children.(p, 41)*

As a result of his anger everyone especially his wife and children are very much afraid of him. As it is said women experience different oppression against them such lack of inheritance, equal rights to men, and they are beaten by their husbands without protection. In *Things Fall Apart* the case of beating is seriously done repeatedly by the men. In this novel, Achebe tries to identify the culture of Igbo men for beating their wives; the known example is for Okonkwo when beating his wife Ekwefi, Ezimna's mother. Along with that he attempts to kill him with his gun but he fails to shoot her. It proves that woman role as female in social was emphasized in domestic sector. Woman is expected to take care of the children and manage the households. The woman place is only in the kitchen. It is the woman range. We also point Okonkwo's neighbor, Mgbobo who is tortured by his husband, Uzowulu, even when she is pregnant.



*Last year when my sister was recovering from an illness, he beat her again so that if the neighbors had not gone in to save she would have been killed. We heard of it, and did as you have been told. The law of Umuofia is that if a woman runs away from her husband her bride-price is returned. But in this case she ran away to save her life. (p, 96)*

The harshness did not happen only in Okonkwo's life or families, but in all of Umuofia culture.

And the tradition of Umuofia people is polygamy. Woman is only like a jewel, used when they are needy. A mistake from a man is only a little accident like getting grazed, but when a woman does mistake, it is called a big dangerous like getting crashed by truck. Almost men in Umuofia do polygamy. Okoye, Okonkwo's neighbor has three wives. Okonkwo also has three wives. Nwakibie, the rich man in Okonkwo's village has nine wives. It is about useless people. This shows that polygamy is given much value in Igbo society whereby women are taken like properties and unvalued human being. When you think behind this polygamy, you may find that society has to face many challenges such poverty and the inequality among women who share one husband.

Women's marginalization in Igbo society we can further see the below paragraph. It shows that women are not equal to men. And the first wife is given a little bit respect but the co-wives are not, as it is exhibited to Nwakibie's wives. Though you can notice that women are called for drinking, they are not allowed to continue drinking together with men. They take the horns and then after they leave men alone drinking. It shows the culture of gender inequality in Igbo society whereby men and women have not the same value. The world in *Things Fall Apart* is an androcentric world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. The greatness of a man in this society is measured in terms of his muscle power, wealth, titles and number of wives. It is a polygamous society. Men of titles occupy a place of importance in the society and are treated with honor and respect. In *Things Fall Apart* no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children he was not considered to be a man. In *Things Fall Apart*, the authority lies with the men. Women do not have a say in any important matter. The idea of masculinity puts women on a remote margin:

*Everybody thanked Okonkwo and the neighbours brought out their drinking horns from the goatskin bags they carried. Nwakibie brought down his own horn, which was fastened to the rafters. The younger of his sons, who was also the youngest man in the group, moved to the centre, raised the pot on his left knee and began to pour out the wine. The first cup went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group drank, beginning with the eldest man. When everyone had drunk two or three horns, Nwakibie sent*

*for his wives. Some of them were not at home and only four came in. "Is Anasi not in?" he asked them. They said she was coming. Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting. Anasi was a middle-aged woman, tall and strongly built. There was authority in her bearing and she looked every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in a large and prosperous family. She wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear. She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away. The men then continued their drinking and talking. (p, 21)*

In the novel, *Things Fall Apart* Achebe describes the condition of women in the Igbo society in which men are permitted to marry many times. Nwakibie,

*"a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who {has} three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children". (p, 20)*

Women are bought and sold into marriage and after marriage they are insulted and beaten by their husbands.

Achebe shows Igbo as a patriarchal society which gives more importance to their sons than to their daughters. The sons' duty is taking care of farming, getting the yam seedling reeds and keeping the farming instruments ready for farm work. Sons get involved in masquerades, wrestling matches, meetings and accompany their fathers to ceremonies, while the daughter's world begins and ends with getting married, giving birth to children and serving the food to their husbands and children. Besides, Igbo society being a patriarchal one, lays emphasis on a woman's capacity to give birth to more than one child, especially sons. In the novel, it is shown that the husbands would slaughter a goat for their wives if they give birth to the third son in succession. For example, when Okonkwo's first wife, Nwoye's mother gives birth to

*"her third son in succession, Okonkwo had gathered goat for her, as was the custom".(82)*

Women in this novel as Achebe shows are not expected to question men as men are supposed to be 'self-decisive'. Men do not like their wives questioning them. The woman is given a secondary status. She is neither the head, nor the decision-maker. She has to obey the orders given by her husband.

They have to stay home only to cook, do house work, serve husbands and look after children. Through the novel, Achebe clearly shows that anything strong is associated with man and

anything weak is associated with woman. For example, Achebe explains that the “yam” crop stands for manliness because of its importance as the staple crop of the Igbo. On the contrary, coco-yam, bean and cassava stand for womanliness. Women as the most hardworking individuals in their societies constitute the core of the rural work such as farming, tending animals and nurturing children. The imposition of colonial ideology and Victorian attitudes make the Nigerian women suffer the loss of their traditional status during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Even the crops are exempted from such discrimination. Yams were an important crop for these people.

*“Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him.”* (Achebe, p.34).

Okonkwo says,

*“I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands.”* (Achebe 35).

This clearly shows the prevailing inequality between the genders in the Ibo community. And the analysis also finds out Okonkwo wishes his son to replace him when being dead and he does not mention where Ekwefi’s daughter, Ezimna can be given the equal chance to Nwoye. It is obviously that women are not considered like people who can be leaders of the family or the clan, this is because the majority consider female gender as the weak people who are nothing.

Igbo culture is based on male superiority; men were higher up on the social scale and earned more respect and honor if they possessed more riches, titles and wives. Women are regarded as unnecessary except for bearing children and performing tasks such as the equivalent of domestic chores. Suppression of women, false perceptions of their ability, and blatant disrespect for their rights are all reasons that masculine dominance is a highly important theme in Achebe’s book. Every wrestling match consisted of solely male competitors –

*“The contest began with boys...”* (p,48)

and it ended with boys. The egwugwu who remained masked at all times and maintained a commonly known yet supposedly hidden identity could not even tolerate a woman among them, blatantly disregarding any consult or opinion a woman had to offer to the tribe. Terms related to women were considered offensive and insulting.



*“Agbala was not only another name for a woman; it could also mean a man who had taken no title” (p 15).*

All of these examples of disregard for women’s worth clearly illustrates Achebe’s message of masculine dominance in the Igbo society. His *Things Fall Apart* famous for the macho image of the protagonist-Okonkwo leaves little room for the projection of feminine values. Okonkwo vents his anger at his son Nwoye, who preferred his mother’s stories of the *“tortoise and its wily ways”* to his father’s *“masculine stories of violence and bloodshed”*(p,55) is very instructive. When Nwoye committed the ultimate ‘abomination’ of establishing links with church goes, Okonkwo repudiates him and having doubts over his own wife and son he says:

*“How then would he have begotten a son like Nwoye... Perhaps he was not his son! No! ... how could he have begotten a woman for a son? (p. 158-159).*

Women in the patriarchal Igbo society are expected to fulfill their gender role as a homemaker and a caregiver in the community while the men are the protector and the breadwinner of the household; the women are the subordinate to the men. As Beauvoir stated, women are seen as the “Other” as compared to the men who are seen as the Subject and the Absolute. This situation can be clearly seen in the protagonist, Okonkwo's wives. They are the homemakers and caregivers of the household. Each wife has to obey him at all costs and they also have to endure Okonkwo's temper and sudden outburst. The living in the patriarchal society the subordinate status of an Igbo woman is a norm that has been practiced since their forefather; the position of man and woman is unquestionable. Even so, there is a minority of women who hold a high position in the society.

Being a good wife is not an easy thing to do in Umuofia. Everything should be based on the rule. Apart from this family situation, it shows that women have many heavy duties to carry out in the family and society as well. When they are not able to fulfill them, they have to suffer much such as being beaten like Okonkwo’s wife, Ekwefi. Okonkwo treats his wife like a servant, demanding that she does whatever he commands her with no questions asked. Women, as demonstrated by Okonkwo's eldest wife here, are taught to be silent and obedient. In fact, women count for so little in Igbo society that they are often not even addressed by their given names, but referred to by their relationship with men. When Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna he says to his wife,

*“He belongs to the clan,” he told her “So look after him”. “Is he staying long with us?” She asked. “Do what you are told, woman,” Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. “When did you become one of the ndichie of Umuofia?” And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions.” ( p.16).*



Regarding the situation happened above, it shows that Okonkwo is not a good man to consult and all what he does, he does not consult his wife before. As their Igbo culture states, woman should respect her husband, want it or not. When Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna, he has not taken time to sit together with his wife to see if it is possible and easy to adopt him but the dictatorship mind of Okonkwo as a man, he at once responds to his wife harshly

*“Do what you are told, woman,” Okonkwo thundered, and stammered”(p,16).*

This also shows the poor value that men gives women.

In the Igbo tribe men take benefit of the contrast between gender and it results in relationships resembling that of a master and a slave.

*“No matter how prosperous a man was, if he is unable to rule his women and his children (especially his women) he is not really a man.”(p.55)*

Men treats their multiple wives like property, and any children they bear belongs to the father as well.

Ekwefi resists although she has a stronger and bolder personality. She has a tendency to provoke Okonkwo but is different than his other wives because she has one daughter, Ezinma, who is Okonkwo's favorite. Not only that but Ezinma is the sole surviving child of the ten that Ekwefi tried to have. In this way, Ekwefi resists the oppressive forces that act against her, such as her bad 'chi', personal god, and her husband, Okonkwo. One of the major forces acting against Ekwefi is her own chi, which is her personal god. While the subject of even the existence of spirits and gods is debatable, there is no doubt that Ekwefi has an issue with childbirth. In the eyes of Igbo culture, the blame would go to both the bad chi of Ekwefi and the ogbanje, an evil child spirit who reincarnates, that continues to torment her by dying. Ekwefi suffers a great deal because of this and *“as she buries one child after another her sorrow gives way to despair and then to grim resignation.”* (p.88). Despite the agony of consistently losing children, she never gives up physically trying and goes to a powerful medicine man for help. Her character is very positive. When hope is almost lost, she gives birth to Ezinma, who survives longer than expected and revives love into Ekwefi. The priestess has now reached Okonkwo's compound and is talks to him outside his hut. She was saying again and again that Agbala wanted to see his daughter, Ezinma. She comes to take Enizma and brings her. Ekwefi does not sleep and Okonkwo asks her:

*“Why do you stand there as though she had been kidnapped?” asked Okonkwo as he went back to his hut. “She will bring her back soon,” Nwoye's mother said .But Ekwefi did not hear these consolations. She stood for a while, and then, all of a*

*sudden, made up her mind. She hurried through Okonkwo's hut and went outside. "Where are you going?" he asked. "I am following Chielo," she replied and disappeared in the darkness.(p,107)*

Achebe shows that woman can achieve what is in her mind. If she wants to do anything, she can do it. For example, Ekwefi first marries to Anene, her previous husband because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene she cannot bear it no longer and she runs away to Okonkwo. It is explicitly realized in the context of the major divinities of the Igbo land. The goddess of the Earth (Ani) has a male (Ezeani) as a priest, whereas the male Oracle of the Hills and the Caves (Agbala) is served by the priestess Chielo. Chielo comes to take Ezinma during the night claiming that Agbala wants to see her:

*"Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was now asleep. But Chielo ignored what he was trying to say and went on shouting that Agbala wanted to see his daughter.... Okonkwo was still pleading that the girl had been ill of late and was asleep. .... The priestess suddenly screamed. "Beware, Okonkwo!" She warned. "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" (p,105)*

Though *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is presented as brave, courageous and manly. He has not been portrayed bowing down before anyone in any circumstances, but, here, we witness that a woman orders Okonkwo to give her his little daughter. Actually, she threatens him. The way Okonkwo agrees to her order is an explicit evidence of a spiritual power of the priestess. Through this episode, Achebe clearly reveals a high degree of honour for a woman in Igbo society that she can perform the role of a priestess, a spiritual leader. Chielo's role as the priestess of Agbala exhibits her obligation as the caretaker of a social custom. She presents herself as a great stateswoman to the service of humanity in her society. A brave leader like Okonkwo cannot prevent Chielo from performing her spiritual duty to her society. In the dead of the night when others (male and female) experience their slumber, Chielo tries her hard to keep Ezinma alive. While reading the novel, we feel that women are not placed at a respected position; still they perform significant role in bringing up, cultivating and preserving the Igbo family, social and cultural traditions and customs. As it is clearly seen in the novel that many of the spiritual entities comprise goddesses and Chielo as a female character plays the role of a priestess.

It reveals that an image of a woman is viewed at a whole at different levels. Everyone in the Igbo society is honourably submissive to her including so called brave men. Women are seen as agents of important social and cultural changes through the roles they play. The roles of men in this novel are limited in terms of their authority and masculine power. However, upon delving beneath this deceiving surface, readers can see that the women of the Igbo clan hold

some powerful position: spiritually as the priestess, symbolically as the earth goddess, and literally as the nurturers of the Ibo people, the caretakers of the yam crops and the mothers and educators of the Igbo children. Achebe is quite progressive and flexible in presenting his women characters. He reveals the power and strength of women in Igbo society. The women folk are helpful to their families and society in multiple ways. While describing Igbo society, it is shown that women work enthusiastically in their society shouldering responsibilities with their men; even they work more than their men because they perform household duties, look after their children, and serve their husbands and at the same time, they work outside of their kitchen to provide their families financially. For example as it is clearly explained in the novel:

*“As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds. The yams were then staked, first with little sticks and later with tall and big tree branches. The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late.”*

Despite her special powers, Ekwefi or other female characters shall be perceived as a representative of the community. Ekwefi's life and her character are as unique as the forms of her subjugation and resistance. It is this combination of individual and collective suffering, opposition and hope for a better life that makes Ekwefi finally instigate active resistance. In conclusion of her acts of resistance, it must be found that she is an extraordinary and strong character.

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