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## Sexism In Things Fall Apart

The presence of sexism, both individual and institutional, runs rampant in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is the most constant theme in the story, more intrinsic in the plotline than even racism, and certainly more deep-rooted. The dominance of the male gender becomes apparent in the first few pages. The fact that men are allowed to keep multiple wives is the first sign of a sexually biased culture (2860). The book in its entirety gives no inkling that women are allowed to be involved anything other than a monogamous relationship, and there is no reason to assume it. Indeed, women are generally treated more like a commodity than as partners.

In the second chapter there is conflict between local villages and it is resolved by the weaker village giving a boy and a girl to the stronger. The boy virtually becomes an adopted child and the girl is wedded to a tribesman. Her desires are of no consequence and her virginity is one of the terms of the resolution, making it plain where her value lies to the Igbo people (2864-2865). Another intimation of the cheapening of females' human worth is present in a line describing Okonkwo's feelings during the New Yam Festival: "He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for a woman" (2878). A later scene shows this dynamic in greater detail: "She was about sixteen and just right for marriage. Her suitor and his relative surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe" (2890). Following this exhibition, she retreats to her mother's hut to help her cook. The mother's admonishment illustrates a corporeal parallel for a woman's position in the Igbo tradition when she tells her daughter, "You grew your ears for decoration, not for hearing" (2891). It is the physical appearance and practical reproductive functionality of a woman that gives her value. In general, no knowledge beyond what is needed for housekeeping and child-rearing is deemed suitable for a woman.

But Achebe also exposes us to a few female functions that are authoritative, and almost revered, amongst the Igbo people. For instance, they upheld beliefs in feminine divinities like Ani, the earth goddess, who "played a greater role in the life of the people than any other deity", as "the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (2875). Also, Agbala (the Oracle) who has one of the loftiest positions in the culture, is only corresponded with through women. During the story of *Things Fall Apart*, this woman is a priestess named Chielo (2921).

There are a few indirect ways Achebe implies the inferiority of a woman's status; one is in a brief delineation of the primary Igbo crops. Yams, he writes, are "the king of crops ... a man's crop." Other crops like cassava and beans were "women's crops" and a footnote deems them "low-status" (2869). Giving background on Okonkwo's father also serves as more than a reason for Okonkwo's severe demeanor, if we read between the lines. The description of the

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deceased Unoka informs us that his wife and children lived poorly, and often starved, because of his indiscretion (2861). We gain further insight into the Igbo culture as Achebe tells us of Okonkwo's notion of his father; he associates Unoka with weakness, and weakness is a trait the Igbo associate with femininity. The link between the two concepts is not only implied, but is quite literal. The word that means woman, *agbala*, is also the term the Igbo use for a man without status or achievements (2864).

One of the biggest manifestations of sexism in the Igbo culture is the violence targeted against women. Okonkwo is a particularly brutal husband, beating his wives and children, even finding excuses to beat those close to him. He is fuming from the current atmosphere of idleness and takes it out on one of his wives by way of a beating (2876). In another instance, he pounds on his youngest wife, Ojiugo, because she left her hut without cooking dinner (2872)! This is more indicative of Okonkwo's vicious vendetta upon his own tenderness (and any other attributes he deems womanly) than a violent mentality inherent in the culture (2865). While Okonkwo may be especially cruel to his women, the whole community seems to have an almost apathetic attitude towards the mental well-being of its women. Okonkwo is rebuked and punished for one particular case of domestic violence, but the only problem with his action seems to be his violation of the Week of Peace. He is told, "The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" (2873). But, while seemingly uncaring, the Igbo attitude is not neglectful.

In a courtroom scene there is a dispute between a woman and her abusive husband being settled. The trial is contingent upon the wife's experiences with her husband, but her word is not even heard—her brothers speak for her. Then, one of the court officials (a village elder) expresses his puzzlement as to why "such a trifle should come before the *egwugwu*" (2900-2901). It is a common Igbo sentiment that women, as a possession of men, can be beaten into subservience.

Such was the position of women in the Igbo culture. The status of women as a step (or two, or three) below men is a widespread occurrence, and is as old as history. Some communities exist in matriarchal form, but such societies are far less common and one must ask why. Perhaps the physical build of males that lend them power, or a different manner of thinking, or perhaps sexism favored men arbitrarily, and the tradition became engrained. In all likelihood the reasons are numerous, but whatever the case, the sex bias is now engrained in our civilization and many others around the world. At this point, it is far more advantageous to envision what true equality might look like, and the path that can lead us there.

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