

## Balancing Male and Female Principles: Teaching About Gender in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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*Things Fall Apart* is a novel that has generated a lot of interest from academicians, students and leisure readers alike. In recent times, the novel has spawned a lot of controversy from feminists, for what has been viewed as Achebe's chauvinistic portrayal, or non-portrayal, depending on whom you ask, of women. This view is not limited to critics alone. As an observer and university history professor, I am often struck by the rigid stance that is assumed by many students who believe that Okonkwo's violent behavior towards women, is somehow representative of the author's and the society's attitude toward women. These same individuals, however, remain silent when Okonkwo's violent behavior is directed towards men! I must suggest that reading *Things Fall Apart* from such a closed stance conceals the complexities of the novel; a novel which holds within it contributions not only to the fields of African literature, religion and history, but also, to scholarship on African women, and gender.

There are as many themes as interpretations of *Things Fall Apart*. The clash between two cultures and the resulting outcome of this encounter is, of course, most central. Yet, what intrigues me about the novel are those subtle, if you like, hidden, themes buried within it. I tell my history students that in *Things Fall Apart*, as in Igboland, things are not *always* as they seem. Rather, like the Igbo masquerade dance, *Things Fall Apart* is in constant motion and dialogue with its spectator who cannot be expected to view nor appreciate the message of the dance by standing rooted in one place. Thus, while a motionless observer may conclude, for instance, that women occupy

a subordinate position in the novel and by extension Igbo society; this is however, *not* the case. Female roles in *Things Fall Apart* are in fact complementary rather than subordinate to male roles. This complementarity or, put differently, balance between maleness and femaleness in the novel also pervades Igbo society as a whole—hence the saying that: “where one thing stands, something else will stand beside it”—an adage which speaks as well to the Igbo abhorrence of absolutisms in every form. The Igbo world therefore is a world of dualities—so that while they admire courage, strength and success, the Igbo are fast to caution us that the coward outlives the warrior!

Like that constantly moving spectator of the Igbo masquerade dance, I would like to suggest a different approach to reading *Things Fall Apart*—a reading which challenges its spectators to view the unfolding dance from various perspectives, and by so doing open up their minds to receive that which I believe is truly an African and female-centered interpretation of the novel. African-centered, because Africa becomes the point of entry into the narrative; and female-centered, because *Things Fall Apart* is viewed through a female lens. What is more, centering gender in *Things Fall Apart* allows us to appreciate the fact that while male activities are emphasized in the novel, the female principle pervades the entire society of Umuofia and administers judgment in events in the community. It is this female principle that discerns the forces that abet social disintegration (male pride, excess and violence) and works toward societal cohesiveness.

#### A word on excesses

Before I move on to weightier issues, I have a word on excesses: The Igbo caution against excesses in all aspects of human endeavor. The Igbo believe and promote a balance or equilibrium of male and female qualities. This balance is most vividly stated in the gender complementarity of Igbo deities and their human workers. A male spiritual force is usually assisted by a female human helper and vice-versa. The combination of these male and female qualities promotes a whole and complete force. In *Things Fall Apart*, the female goddess *Ani*, for instance, has a male priest, Ezeani; and the male oracle *Agbala*, has female priestesses, Chika and Chielo.

This Igbo need for a balance of male and female qualities is also illustrated this time in human terms in a conversation that takes

place at Obierika's house. Ogbuefi Ndulue, the oldest man in Ire village has died, but the drum has not yet been beaten to inform Umuofia of his death. The reason for this is that his first wife, Ozoemena, had died moments after her husband's death. In the passage below, Okonkwo's friends express their admiration for a great warrior who is able to affirm and celebrate his wife without downplaying his own strength:

"It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind," said Obierika. "I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her."

"I did not know that," said Okonkwo. "I thought he was a strong man in his youth."

"*He was indeed,*" said Ofoedu. [My emphasis] (Achebe 1959, 68)

Chinua Achebe, in the above exchange, has cleverly used Obierika and Ofoedu, as well as the introduction of Ndulue and Ozoemena's praise song to illuminate Igbo admonition to its members, especially those members held in high esteem, to strive at all times to achieve a balance between male and female qualities within themselves.

### ***Okonkwo*—an example of what Igbo Society is not**

Whenever I teach *Things Fall Apart*, I find that it is always helpful to dedicate the first half an hour or so of classroom discussion to a process designed to acquaint my students with Okonkwo, Achebe's main character. In a section which I entitle: "Okonkwo—an example of what Igbo Society is not," I attempt to challenge, in a scholarly manner, some of the misconceptions that may arise about masculinity in *Things Fall Apart* and Igbo society in general. In my experience I have found that despite the abundance of source material on *Things Fall Apart* and Okonkwo,<sup>1</sup> the latter remains one of the most misunderstood characters in African literature. Many of my students, perhaps echoing in a sense, the opinion of some scholars of the African novel, have argued that Okonkwo is representative of Igbo cultural ideals about masculinity.<sup>2</sup> I strongly disagree, for such an interpretation in my opinion reads too neatly from Western consciousness. In Igbo perceptiveness, Okonkwo is not, and cannot be, representative of his culture, because he is unable to achieve the

balance or equilibrium that his people so strongly affirm. It is true, that he embodies the qualities that the Igbo people admire: strength, courage, bravery; but, at the same time, Okonkwo exemplifies, rather forcefully, those attributes that his people loathe: impatience, violence, arrogance, intolerance and extremism. Moreover, each time that Okonkwo allows any of these abhorrent attributes to surface, he is promptly criticized, condemned and/or, in many cases, punished by his people.

Let us consider as I would with my students, a few examples from the narrative. During a kindred meeting, Osugo, one of Okonkwo's peers, contradicts him, and we are told that Okonkwo immediately calls him a woman. The author however does not let this matter rest. In the very next paragraph, Achebe informs his readers that everyone at the kindred meeting sided with Osugo and thoroughly rebuked Okonkwo for his impertinence, revealing at once Igbo society's stance on Okonkwo's behavior (Achebe 1959, 26).

Another case in point: Okonkwo devastates Umuofia serenity by beating his wife during the sacred Week of Peace. His action is an offense against the Earth Goddess. Okonkwo is therefore chastised and punished by her male priest who laments that "the evil [he has] done can ruin the whole clan" (Achebe 1959, 30). An inwardly repentant Okonkwo is then instructed to take a number of sacrifices to *Ani's* shrine in order to appease her. His punishment does not end there, Okonkwo also suffers the scorn of his community at large, who label him as arrogant and disrespectful. In fact, the oldest man in the village, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, exults a past in which the punishment for breaking the Peace of *Ani* in Umuofia was death (Achebe 1959, 31).

Allow me to consider one more example: The male oracle, Agbala, has decreed that Umuofia kill Ikemefuna, the young man who has been living with Okonkwo for the past three years. Ogbuefi Ezeudu cautions Okonkwo, "that boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (Achebe 1959, 57). However, Okonkwo, who is ruled by the fear of appearing weak, tragically leads the delegation of men who carry out the will of the oracle. Achebe describes in chilling detail Okonkwo's role in this atrocity:

Ikemefuna looked back, and the man growled at him to go on and not stand looking back. The way he said it sent cold fear down Ikemefuna's back. His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried. Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was

afraid to look back. As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father, they have killed me!" as he ran toward him. *Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.* [My emphasis] (Achebe 1959, 61)

The last section of this passage underscores the truth—a truth that Okonkwo kills, not because he feels compelled to carry out the order of the oracle, but for a more selfish reason—an innate need to prove to the Umuofia elders present, and especially himself, that he is not weak. This same mulish instinct propels Okonkwo (despite being haunted by the chilling memory of his abominable act) to visit his best friend Obierika and soon steer their conversation to his latest show of "manliness":

"I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy," [Okonkwo] asked Obierika.

"Because I did not want to," Obierika replied sharply. "I had something better to do."

"You sound as if you question the authority and decision of the Oracle, who said he should die."

"I do not. Why should I? *But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision.*" [My emphasis]

"But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then."

"*You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you, I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families.*" [Again, my emphasis]

"The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm."

"That is true," Obierika agreed. "But if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it." (Achebe 1959, 66-67)

In this passage, Achebe places Obierika in sharp contrast to his hotheaded and reckless friend Okonkwo. He is a man of title, a

respected elder. Obierika is upheld as the voice of reason, the voice of community, the voice of balance. What is more, Obierika is a man who Okonkwo himself holds in high esteem. Therefore, when Obierika informs Okonkwo that it is neither weak nor cowardly for a "father" to allow others to carry out the will of the gods, Achebe is actually presenting the *mind-set* of the Igbo people. In the Igbo world gods are not *always* just; and although individuals within the society are discouraged from openly rejecting the decrees of the gods, they do have the right, and are in fact, expected to remove themselves from participating in actions that are morally offensive to themselves.

This passage also reveals the complexity of the Igbo religious order that places the will of one deity (in this case the male oracle *Agbala*), in sharp opposition to another (the goddess *Ani*). Even though *Agbala* pronounces Ikemefuna's death, Okonkwo is guilty of breaking the moral code of the society and must now contend with the wrath of a much more superior force—the judgment of the Earth Goddess, whose bowels he has contaminated with the blood of his "son."

In my history classes, I use the aforementioned examples to address the fact that in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's so-called extreme exhibitions of "manliness" are called to task at *every occurrence*, either by his kinsfolk, his peers/friends, or by even greater spiritual forces, of particular eminence, such as the Earth Goddess *Ani*.

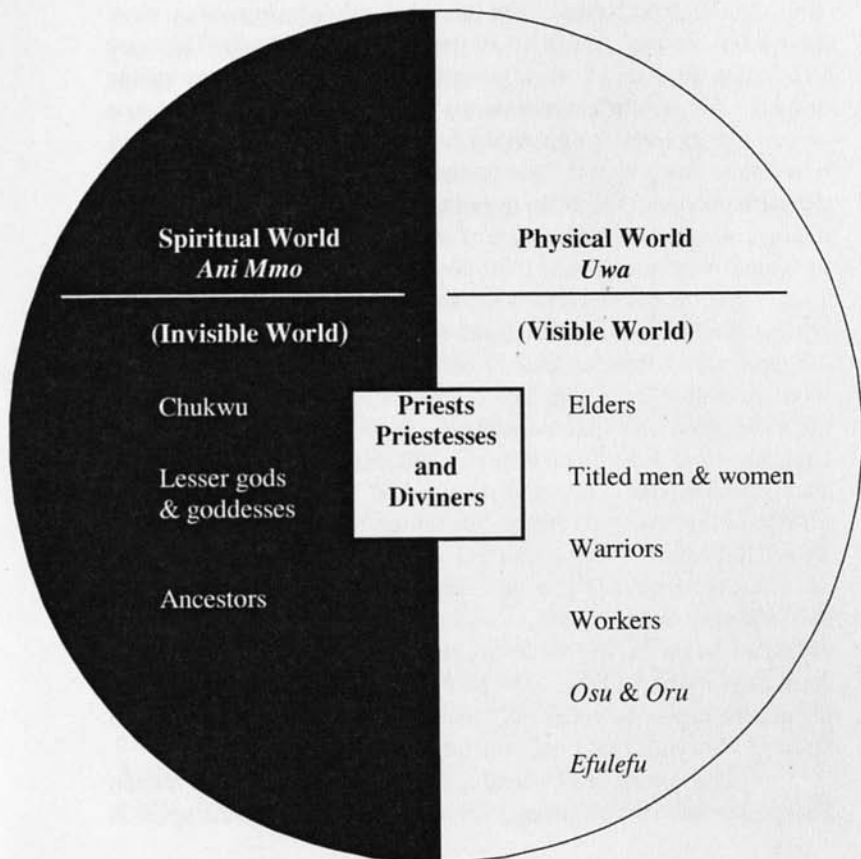
### The Igbo Worldview and the Female Principle

Another voyage that I take my history students through is an explanation of the role and place of the female principle in Igboland and particularly in the novel. You may be wondering at this point, what exactly is this female principle that I have been alluding to throughout this discussion. The female principle embodies all aspects of female involvement in society. The female principle, therefore, encompasses women's activities within the human or physical/visible realm as well as female activities in the non-human or spiritual/invisible realm. In the human or physical/visible realm, this presence is revealed in the types of roles women assume, such as in their "work" as mothers, wives, traders and farmers. In the non-human or spiritual/invisible realm, the female presence is personified in the goddesses, medicines (*ogwu*), and oracles, as well as in women's "work"

as diviners, priestesses and healers.<sup>3</sup>

Why, you may ask, do I espouse the inclusion of the so-called non-human or spiritual/invisible realm in my analysis of gender in *Things Fall Apart*; after all spiritual forces are not animate? The answer is simple and can be found in the worldview of the Igbo people. Igbo societal structure operates within a cyclical movement of time, i.e. a continuum. Igbo peoples, therefore, identify two worlds—*uwa*, the human or physical/visible world, and *ani mmo*, the non-human or spiritual/invisible world. These worlds are not separate, but like two half circles (or two halves of a kola nut) when connected, make up one continuous, complete, and whole Igbo world.

Figure 1 - The Igbo World



The Igbo believe in the presence of a visible universe of human beings and natural forces and phenomena. They also believe in an invisible universe of divine beings—good and bad spirits and departed ancestors. This universe is unfathomable, and therefore terrifying, and the Igbo exemplify this sentiment in the following adage: *onye fulu mmo di?* In other words, “who sees a spirit and lives?” Many Igbo deities represent personifications of natural phenomena, like the earth (*Ani*), the sun (*Anyanwu*), the river (*Idemili*) and thunder (*Amadiora*). Other spirits are deified medicines, otherwise referred to as *ogwu* (Arinze 1970, 12; Shelton 1971, 69; Metuh 1981, 52-56).

The Igbo believe that: *alusi juputalu obodo nine di n'ani Igbo* (meaning that, spirits fill all the towns in Igboland). These are believed to have supernatural power to help or hinder. These visible and invisible worlds commune and interact with one another in a network of relationships guided by fixed laws called *omenani*, (literal translation, that which is done on the Earth) which are governed by the earth goddess, *Ani*. What is more, any departure from these ordinances can upset the moral code of society and thus bring disaster to individual members (Arinze 1970, 13; Metuh 1981, 52).

At the zenith of the spiritual world is Chukwu, who is the creator of all things. Chukwu is neither male nor female. Chukwu is too great a force to behold and is therefore, assisted by a pantheon of more accessible lesser gods and goddesses (*Amadiora* and *Ani*) who are autonomous, yet interdependent. The oracles (*Agbala*) also inhabit this world and administer their will through their physical agents. The ancestors (*ndi-iche*, also represented as *egwugwu* in *Things Fall Apart*) are the dead mothers and fathers of the clan who maintain a close link between the human and non-human worlds. They live in *ani-mmo*, but are called upon to be present during everyday meetings and important events. Libation is poured in their honor and they pass judgment on the events of the day as the Supreme Court of masked spirits, *egwugwu* (Achebe 1959, 87-94). In between these worlds are the priests, priestesses (Ezeani, Chika and Chielo) and diviners who embody idiosyncrasies from both worlds.

The human or physical/visible world is made up of human beings, *mmadu* (which literally means *mmuo di ndu*—the spirit is

alive). At the top of this world are the elders or *ndi-iche*. Titled men and women follow these, and next are the warriors, and workers. The *osu* and *oru*<sup>1</sup> occupy the unenviable position of outcast, but even more disregarded are the useless persons, or *efulefu*, who exist at the very bottom of the social ladder.<sup>2</sup>

In this worldview, the ancestors and the ethereal entities, in a circular fashion, jostle between the spiritual and living worlds. In view of this nexus, an informed inquiry into the female presence in *Things Fall Apart* must, therefore, consider female involvement in both these realms.

### **The female principle [physical/human] in *Things Fall Apart***

Having made a case for the examination of female roles in both the physical and spiritual realms, my next order of business is to provide my students with concrete examples of these roles in the novel. I have often charged students into debate by presenting an extremely provocative critique extended by one of Chinua Achebe's contemporaries, Buchi Emecheta, in which she admonishes him for his "sexist" depiction of women in *Things Fall Apart*. Specifically, Emecheta attacks what she asserts as Achebe's notion of "the good woman." Here are her words:

The good woman, in Achebe's portrayal, is the one who kneels down and drinks the dregs after her husband. In [*Things Fall Apart*], when the husband is beating his wife, the other women stand around saying, "It's enough, it's enough." In his view that kind of subordinate woman is the good woman. (Emecheta in James 1990, 42)<sup>3</sup>

I allow my students a few moments to ponder her words, then I ask them whether they feel that Emecheta's critique is founded. "Is this," I ask "in fact the way that Chinua Achebe truly depicts women in *Things Fall Apart*?" As often as I have posed this question, I have found that invariably many more students than not agree with Emecheta, at least initially. My challenge then becomes to scrutinize Emecheta's analysis, and use it as a point of entry into my discussion of the role of the female principle in *Things Fall Apart*. First, I examine Achebe's portrayal of women within the physical realm. Some of the points that I have extended in my classroom discussions, I present

below.

In *Things Fall Apart*, as in Igboland, women are the cultivators of food crops including cassava, cocoyam, and corn (Achebe 1959, 22-23). They are also the owners, benefactors and promoters of the market economy. In fact, they are among the numbers who we are informed are viciously slaughtered by European invaders in Mbame (Achebe 1959, 139-140).<sup>4</sup>

Women also act as the griotes of the society—transmitting history from one generation to the next. They are important culture-makers, nurturers and custodians of family wholeness. In *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye's mother and Ekwefi sit with their children at night and tell them stories about the earth and the sky (Achebe 1959, 53-54, 96-99). Even Okonkwo is soothed by the memory of the story of the mosquito and the ear that his mother told him as a child (Achebe 1959, 75).

I then ask my students to consider a few concrete examples with me from the novel. At the beginning of *Things Fall Apart*, we are introduced to a society that is at the verge of war: "Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia" (Achebe 1959, 11). The people of Umuofia follow their normal course of action—war on the one hand, or compensation in the form of a young man and virgin girl. I pose the following question to my students: "if women are so disregarded in this society, why is the entire village planning to go to war?" I then raise a separate, but related question which has to do with why society imposes a reprisal (a young man and a virgin girl) that is so grave.

In Umuofia, the symbol of war and justice is embodied in a female protective medicine called *agadi nwanyi*. I read from the following passage in which Chinua Achebe places the female principle of medicine at center-stage in the unfolding events:

Umuofia was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. Nobody knew how old. But on one point there was general agreement—the active principle in that medicine had been an old woman with one leg. In fact, the medicine itself was called *agadi-nwanyi*, or old woman. It had its shrine in the center of Umuofia, in a cleared spot. And if anybody was foolhardy as to pass by the shrine after dusk

he was sure to see the old woman hopping about. (Achebe 1959, 11-12)

We collectively take a few moments to digest the passage. I then ask my students to consider why, if women are so disregarded in society, the Umuofia symbol of war is represented by a woman, *agadi nwanyi*, who the author informs us never fights a war of blame?

In the second half of the novel, Achebe introduces us to the *umuada*, the strongest arm of female government in Igboland. The *umuada* include all married, unmarried, divorced and widowed daughters of the lineage or community. They hold their meetings on a rotational basis between the communities in which they married and their natal villages.<sup>5</sup> The *umuada* also act as political pressure groups in their natal villages. They play important roles in creating unifying influences, settling intra-lineage disputes and disputes between natal and marital villages.

The *umuada* also perform various rites, rituals and sacrifices for the community. It is the *umuada* leader, the *ada ebo*, who performs the final absolution rites for new brides. On the day in question, the bride-to-be is instructed to confess all her wrongdoings to the *umuada*, who in turn purify her (Okonjo 1976, 52-53). In *Things Fall Apart*, Uchendu's daughter performs this purification ritual for her brother's new bride:

The daughters of the family were all there, some of them having come a long way from their homes in distant villages. Uchendu's eldest daughter had come from Obodo, nearly half a day's journey away. The daughters of Uchendu's brothers were also there. It was a full gathering of *umuada*, in the same way as they would meet if a death occurred in the family. There were twenty-two of them. They sat in a big circle on the ground and the bride sat in the center with a hen in her right hand . . . Uchendu's eldest daughter, Njide, asked the questions. (Achebe 1959, 132)

At this point in my analysis, I like to introduce the argument of literary critic, Obioma Nnaemeka, who makes the case that if a strong woman is one who is able to walk out on an unwanted marriage union, that Chinua Achebe's Ekwefi, represents one. She is as, Nnaemeka argues, the first example of a rebellious woman in African literature (Nnaemeka 1995, 92). I suggest to my students that Ekwefi's

first act of defiance is when she runs away from her home and marries Okonkwo, even though he cannot afford to pay her bride price (Achebe 1959, 40, 109). She also defies Chielo and her oracle, by trailing the priestess, when *Agbala* asks to see "his daughter" Ezinma (Achebe 1959, 105). Ekwefi's act of defiance is serious and extremely dangerous, because humans are not supposed to openly challenge the will of the gods.

I then like to return to Buchi Emecheta, in order to test her theory that "the good woman" in *Things Fall Apart*, "kneels to her husband and drinks the dregs after him." Emecheta's speculation I believe, is based on a passage from *Thing Fall Apart* that she vastly misrepresents and misconstrues. Anasi is described as a middle-aged woman. She is 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 [also] wore the anklet of her husband's titles, which the first wife alone could wear. [Anasi] walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. *She went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn.* [my emphasis] (Achebe 1959, 20)

Herein lies Emecheta's point of contention; and immediately following, my response to her claim: it is true that Anasi is said to kneel to her husband. However, in Igboland, *this behavior is not gender, but age specific*. Kneeling is merely a sign of respect. Men kneel to older women as well (Nnaemeka 1995, 97-98). And as for Emecheta's claim that women drink the dregs after their husbands, women in Igboland *never* do this; the dregs are *always* saved for "men who [are] going in to their wives" (Achebe 1959, 21).

After we are done considering Emecheta's charge of chauvinism in *Things Fall Apart*, I like to steer our discussion away from literary scholars and their criticisms; and instead provide my students further expansion and explication of women's position in *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, my next order of business is often to contemplate Chinua Achebe's rendering of female solidarity and cooperation, and this I use as a window through which issues of female power and authority in Igboland as well as in *Things Fall Apart* are considered. I tell my students that we need not look too deeply into the text to find illustrations. In *Things Fall Apart*, there is a sense of cooperation

and protection between wives in polygamous households. Nwoye's mother borrows fire from her co-wife Ekwefi (Achebe 1959, 41). The daughters of Umuofia assist Obierika's wife in preparing for her daughter's *uri*. They cook together and some women donate food (Achebe 1959, 112-113). And in Mbanta, Okonkwo's wives share responsibilities in the preparation of their going-away feast. (Achebe 1959, 163-165)

This demonstration of solidarity and collaboration is however most forcefully illustrated in Nwoye's mother's protective actions towards her co-wife, Ojiugo, when the latter thoughtlessly disregards her responsibilities to their husband and her children. It was Ojiugo's turn to cook for Okonkwo, but instead, she leaves her children behind and goes to plait her hair. Nwoye's mother not only covers for Ojiugo, but also feeds her co-wife's children. When Okonkwo beats Ojiugo after she returns home, we are informed that his two other wives "[run] out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week" (Achebe 1959, 29).

Achebe also presents expressions of female power and authority in *Things Fall Apart*. In pre-colonial Igbo society, women often employed time-honored and customary sanctions to punish wrongdoing. When particular women were aggrieved, their normal course of action would be to let out a traditional cry of grievance, and then converge at a central point (normally an open space, like the village *ilo*, or village square). This was the point from where they would carry out their sentence. Their judgments included the levying of fines, use of boycotts, strikes, force and "making war." "Making war," was the toughest sanction available to Igbo women to punish wrongdoing (Van Allen 1979, 170).<sup>6</sup> In *Things Fall Apart*, when a cow is let loose and destroys women's crops, the author presents his readers with a telling illustration of Igbo women's sanction. The women, we are told,

immediately drive [the cow] back to its [male] owner who at once paid the heavy fine which the village imposed on anyone whose cow was let loose on his neighbors crops. When the women had exacted the penalty, they checked among themselves to see if any woman had failed to come out when the cry had been raised. (Achebe 1959, 114)

This paragraph not only draws attention to the administering of female

justice and punishment (in this case, the collection of "the heavy fine"), but also portrays the day-to-day governance and policing of women's activities, where individual women are held accountable to the group. The women checked to make sure that all Umuofia women had heeded the traditional call. Any woman who had not responded would have instantaneously been punished.

Igbo women traditionally<sup>7</sup> resisted wrongdoing in both covert and overt ways depending on the circumstance. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe presents a telling episode of covert female power and resistance. We are introduced to a furious Okonkwo who beats his favorite wife Ekwefi for cutting a few leaves from his banana tree to wrap food (Achebe 1959, 38). Now any rational human being knows that there is *absolutely* nothing wrong with Ekwefi's actions. However, Okonkwo cannot be described as rational. It has been established that Okonkwo's quick temper was frowned upon by all in his society. This is a man, who not only takes a gun to one of his wives (Achebe 1959, 39), but also participates in the ritual murder of his own son (Achebe 1959, 61)! By the end of the novel Okonkwo decapitates two men and shoots a third to death! Is it any wonder then, that Okonkwo's wives rebuke him from a distance? In fact, I suggest to my students that their behavior should be considered dangerously confrontational.

I then contrast Okonkwo's act of battery, with the only other case of spousal abuse in the novel. Uzowulu's brothers-in-law have beaten him up and removed their sister and her children from his home (Achebe 1959, 90-91). He brings the case before the Umuofia Supreme Court. The decision of the court illustrates the position of Umuofia society on spousal abuse.

"We have heard both sides of the case," said the Evil Forest. "Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute." . . . He turned to Uzowulu's group and allowed a short pause . . . "Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. *It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman.*" [my emphasis] (Achebe 1959, 93)

The society's position on spousal abuse is clear—non-tolerance. First, Umuofia turns a blind eye, and in fact celebrates the vigilante justice of Uzowulu's brothers-in-law who beat him up. Furthermore, the *egwugwu* decision clearly elucidates the fact that vio-

lence against women is such a grave crime in this society, that its victims are granted audience in society's Supreme Court where their perpetrators are dragged to justice.

### The female principle [invisible/spiritual] in *Things Fall Apart*

As a point of entry into my discussion of the female principle within the spiritual realm in *Things Fall Apart*, I ask my students to consider anthropologist C. K. Meek's explanation of the centrality of deities and spirits in the day-to-day running of Igbo society. Here are his words: "[T]he real rulers of [Igbo] town[s] are the ancestors or spirits, and . . . living persons who act as rulers are merely the agents of [these spirits]" (Meek 1937, 159).

The most powerful and well-known deities in Igboland are female (Shelton 1971, 126). In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe introduces many female spirits and goddesses. *Ogwugwu* is the spirit connected with fertility, protection and achieving one's ambitions (Achebe 1959, 203). *Ani* is the Earth Goddess and the owner of all land (Achebe 1959, 17). *Idemili* and *Ngene* are goddesses of the river and streams respectively (Achebe 1959, 146, 203).

Ritual authority is also vested in women. Chielo, the priestess of *Agbala* serves as the agent by which Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma is saved (Achebe 1959, 100-109). As manly as Okonkwo is, he is subservient to Chielo, who proves to be one of the strongest defenders of the old religion by the end of the novel (Achebe 1959, 143).

[Chielo] was the priestess of *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. In ordinary life Chielo was a widow with two children. She was very friendly with Ekwefi and they shared a common shed in the market. She was particularly fond of Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma, who she called "my daughter." Quite often she bought bean cakes and gave Ekwefi some to take home to Ezinma. Anyone seeing Chielo in ordinary life would hardly believe she was the same person who prophesied when the spirit of *Agbala* was upon her. (Achebe 1959, 49)

Chika, *Agbala*'s priestess in Okonkwo's father's time, is also described as being "full of the power of her god and . . . greatly feared" (Achebe 1959, 17).

As suggested earlier, in *Things Fall Apart*, the female prin-

ceptle is also embodied in powerful war and market medicines. Umuofia's reputation as "powerful in war and in magic" is dependent upon the fact that "its most potent war medicine . . . had been an old woman with one leg . . . called agadi-nwanyi" (Achebe 1959, 11). The market of Umuike grows and flourishes because the people have made a great *female* medicine.

"The market of Umuike is a wonderful place . . . It is the result of a great medicine," said Obierika. "The people of Umuike wanted their market to grow and swallow up the markets of their neighbors. So they made a powerful medicine. Every market day, before the first cockcrow, this medicine stands on the market ground in the shape of an old woman with a fan. With this magic fan she beckons to the market all the neighboring clans. She beckons in front of her and behind her, to her right and to her left. (Achebe 1959, 113)

However *Ani*, the Earth Goddess and owner of all land, represents the greatest and most powerful expression of female religious power in *Things Fall Apart* and in Igboland.

### ***Ani* as main character in *Things Fall Apart***

Having hopefully by this point, provided my students with a background in which to confront gender in *Things Fall Apart*, I conclude our investigation by taking them through a female-centered interpretation of the novel that distinguishes *Ani* as the main character. I start by asking them to consider the following statement: all activity in *Things Fall Apart* is governed by what is acceptable, or not acceptable, to *Ani*, the Earth Goddess and personified daughter of Chukwu. No sooner than I utter these words, am I confronted by a room full of bewildered faces. I acknowledge their bewilderment, but implore them to stick with me for a moment—I then go on. I inform them that *Ani* is the strongest integrating institution in *Things Fall Apart* and also Igbo community as a whole. Her influence on her people is greater than that of any other deity. She is the owner of all land and the ultimate judge of morality and conduct (Achebe 1959, 33; Ogbaa 1992, 30). She is also the source of fertility. Before planting crops, sacrifices are made in *Ani's* name (Achebe 1959, 36; Ogbaa 1992, 31). The Feast of the New Yam and the Week of Peace are celebrated in her honor (Achebe 1959, 36; Ogbaa 30-31). Yams cannot

be eaten before being offered to *Ani* who is in close communion with the ancestors. Customs in Igboland are even called *omenani* in recognition of the fact that they derived their authority from *Ani* (Ogbaa 1992, 30).

Offenses against *Ani* are known as *nso-Ani*, or abominations (Achebe 1959, 31). These transgressions represent a dangerous threat to the unity of the community. They include: murder (which is punishable by death) (Achebe 1959, 124); manslaughter (punishable by a seven-year exile) and suicide (Achebe 1959, 124, 207); an unnatural swelling of the stomach (Achebe 1959, 18); twins (Achebe 1959, 125); obstructing the peace (Achebe 1959, 30) etc. Offenders are punished immediately, in order not to incur the wrath of *Ani* on the entire community.

I ask my students to consider another proposition: that Okonkwo's downfall can be attributed to his shunning the female qualities within him in his misguided attempt not to appear weak. I explain that it is this blatant disregard of the female principle that becomes the catalyst which propels Okonkwo to commit a number of serious offenses against *Ani*. His first offense is when he beats his wife Ojiugo during the sacred Week of Peace. His other wives remind him that no one is allowed to raise a finger against another person during this week of serenity, but Okonkwo, we are told, is not one to stop things mid-way even if he has to risk offending the gods. Before dusk, the priest of the Earth Goddess calls on him. Okonkwo brings out kola, at which time Ezeani retorts:

"Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." Okonkwo tried to explain to him what his wife had done, but Ezeani seemed to pay no attention. He held a short staff in his hand, which he brought down on the floor to emphasize his points. "Listen to me" he said when Okonkwo had spoken. "You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained that before we plant any crops in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil." He brought down his staff heavily on the floor. "Your wife was at fault, but even if you came in to your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her." His staff came down again. "The evil you

have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish." His tone now changed from anger to command. "You will bring to the shrine of *Ani* tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries." He rose and left the hut. (Achebe 1959, 30-31)

Okonkwo's second offense and abomination against *Ani*, occurs when he takes part in the ritual killing of Ikemefuna. "That boy calls you father," said Ezeudu, "do not have a hand in his death" (Achebe 1959, 40). Yet for fear of appearing weak and cowardly, Okonkwo leads the delegation of men who carry out the will of the oracle. Okonkwo's best friend Obierika, informs him in a prophetic voice of doom, that what he has done is the kind of action for which *Ani* wipes out whole families. Even though the male oracle pronounced Ikemefuna's death, the oracle did not ask Okonkwo to do it himself. In striking the blow that kills Ikemefuna, Okonkwo has broken a moral code of the land—a code that *Ani* is charged with upholding. Moreover, it is this act, which sets into motion, a chain of events that ultimately lead to Okonkwo's downfall.

The offense, for which Okonkwo is eventually exiled, is his accidental killing of the son of a kinsman whose funeral observances Okonkwo attends. In an ironic twist of fate, Okonkwo's gun accidentally discharges and a pellet kills the son of Ezeudu, the elder who had warned Okonkwo not to take a part in the murder of Ikemefuna. It is a crime against the Earth Goddess to kill a clansman (albeit in Okonkwo's case his actions were accidental) and a man who commits manslaughter must flee from the land (Achebe 1959, 124). Okonkwo's immediate punishment is the burning down of his house and property. This is carried out by a group of Umuofia men, in order to appease the Earth Goddess. These men, we are told, had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. In fact, his greatest friend, Obierika, was amongst them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman (Achebe 1959, 124-125).

Okonkwo and his family seek refuge in his mother's village. Uchendu, his mother's youngest brother explains the rationale behind this:

It is true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man

belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. And that is why we say that mother is supreme (Achebe 1959, 94).

The Igbo give their daughters the name, Nneka, "Mother is Supreme." They have no similar name for fathers.<sup>8</sup> The culture's expectation about the relationship to and position of mothers is very strict. In *Things Fall Apart*, human salvation, especially male salvation, is presented as matrifocal. It is through Okonkwo's mother's lineage that honor and dignity are restored to the exiled warrior (Kubayanda 1987, 14).

In an ironic act of disillusionment, Okonkwo commits his fourth and final crime—he takes his own life! Suicide is a crime against *Ani*, and who ever commits it, cannot be buried within *Ani's* bowels, but must be thrown away into the evil forest to rot on top of the earth. Neither Okonkwo's best friend nor the villagers can touch his body. They therefore appeal to the colonial officer to cut down their fallen friend's corpse. In the end, Okonkwo's death at his own hands mirrors his father's death—a death that is both shameful and dishonorable. What is more, Okonkwo can no longer expect to join the world of the ancestors.

## Conclusion

When one centers gender as a category of interpretation in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, new meanings emerge—meanings that situate *Things Fall Apart* as a cautionary narrative about the dangers of excess, of disregarding the female principle. In this positioning, Okonkwo's downfall can be attributed to his systematic rejection of the female qualities within him in order not to appear weak. One could further argue that it is this tragic flaw of his, Okonkwo's debilitating fear of failure and weakness, which pushes him to upset the moral code of his society—a code which *Ani*, the Earth Goddess, is charged with upholding. His consequent reactions ultimately lead to his downfall—a ruin which *Ani*, again, is responsible for exacting. In an extraordinary twist of fate at the end of the novel, this fearless and brave warrior commits the abominable act of suicide, another crime against the Earth goddess, thus symbolically "becoming" that father whom he has lived his entire life trying not to

be. For, as Chinua Achebe writes: "[I]ndeed [Okonkwo] was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death" (Achebe 1959, 18). And indeed what a tragic and shameful death Okonkwo dies in the end. Let me end by reiterating once again that a close reading of *Things Fall Apart* proves beyond a reasonable doubt, that the female principle in the novel, as well as within Igboland, is not subordinate to the male; it rather, saturates Igbo society and upholds the moral code and equilibrium of its people.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I use the Igbo words *osu* and *oru* because the word "slave" does not, in my view describe the institution as appropriately as I would like. "Slave" carries with it connotations of chattel slavery—an institution that did not, in fact, exist in Igboland. There were two kinds of "slaves" in Igboland, *oru* and *osu*. *Oru* were "slaves" who had been purchased by people and the *osu* were people who had been dedicated to the gods or goddesses. For the differences between the so-called African "slavery" and European "slavery," see S. N. Ezeanya, "The Osu (Cult-Slave) System in Igboland," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Volume 1 (1967): 35-45; W. R. G. Horton, "The Ohu System of Slavery in a Northern Ibo Village-Group," *Africa* 24, No. 4 (1954): 311-318; Walter Rodney, "African Slavery and Other Forms of Social Oppression on the Upper Guinea Coast in the Context of the Atlantic Slave-Trade," *Journal of African History* 7, No. 3 (1966): 431-443; and Paul Edwards, ed., *Equiano's Travels* (London: Heinemann, 1967 (1789)).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the Igbo worldview, see, Francis Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1970), 9-13; Emefie Ikenga Metuh, *God and Man in African Religion*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1981), 48-59; Emefie E. Metuh, "The Supreme God in Igbo Life and Worship" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Volume 5 (1973): 1-11; Chinwe Achebe, *The World of Obanje* (Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishers Ltd., 1986), 9-20; Kalu Ogbaa, *Gods, Oracles and Divinities: Folkways in Chinua Achebe's Novels* (Trenton, New Jersey: African World Press, Inc., 1992), 9-60. Evidence was also gathered from Chinua Achebe, telephone conversation with author, 24 May 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Florence Stratton offers a similar critique in "How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Never Together," 25.

<sup>4</sup> For more about Igbo women's roles as farmers and traders see, Felix K. Ekechi, "Gender and Economic Power: The Case of Igbo Market Women of Eastern Nigeria," in *African Market Women and Economic Power: The Role of Women in African Economic Development*, eds. Bessie House-Midamba and Felix K. Ekechi (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), 41-57; Gloria Chuku, "Women in the Economy of Igboland, 1900-1970: A Survey," *African Economic History* 23 (1995): 37-50; Felicia Ekejiuba, "Omu Okwei, The Merchant Queen of Ossomari: A Biographical Sketch," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Volume 3, No. 4 (June 1967): 633-646; S. Leith-Ross, *African Women: A Study of the Igbo of Nigeria* (London, 1965). See also, Nwando Achebe, "Farmers, Traders, Potters and Weavers: Nsukka Women as Economic Actors" in *Farmers, Traders, Warriors and Kings: Female Power and Authority in Northern Igboland, 1900-1960* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Married women in Igboland traditionally maintained links between two lineages—their husband's and their father's. They share in the activities of their husband's lineages, and yet maintain membership in their own father's lineages.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of Igbo women's resistance strategies, look at Judith Van Allen, "Sitting on a Man: Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women," *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Volume 6, No. 2 (1972): 165-181; Obikaram Echeva, *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire*, Dutton Press: New York, 1992; Audrey Wipper, "Riot and Rebellion Among African Women: Three Examples of Women's Political Clout," Working Paper #108 (Michigan: Michigan State University, December 1985), 27-41.

<sup>7</sup> The term "traditional" is problematic, but it is used here to mean, "pre-colonial."

<sup>8</sup> The only other name that acknowledges the existence of this kind of supremacy is the name *Chukwuka* which means "God is Supreme."

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The first part of the report deals with the general situation of the country and the progress of the war. It is followed by a detailed account of the operations of the army and the navy. The report then discusses the financial situation and the state of the public works. The final part of the report contains the conclusions and recommendations of the committee.

The committee has the honor to inform you that the report has been read and approved by the Council of Ministers. It is now being printed and will be distributed to all members of the Council and to the public.

I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
The Secretary of State.

Approved by the Council of Ministers on the 15th day of January 1888.

The Secretary of State.