

# He falls apart: the art of female subversion in african literature



Within any system of oppression, the oppressed, once they realize their treatment is a type of oppression, oftentimes have the impulse to resist. This resistance, sometimes exceptionally dangerous, often bucked by popular opinion and those who have not recognized their own oppression, can take several different forms. Few can deny writing remains one of the most influential types of resistance, words capable of breaking down barriers that divide, a form of education that reaches out to the masses.

Within several distinguished African texts such as *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, women exhibit exceptional craft and wit to buck traditional gender roles and circumnavigate the systems of oppression established through patriarchal norms. This circumvention not only occurs within the actual text, exhibited by strong characters such as Auntie Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* and Ezinma in *Things Fall Apart*, but also within the techniques the authors use to tell their narratives, paying close attention to narration and characterization.

A discussion of female subversion and strength, particularly within the context of African literature and culture, proves to be exceptionally timely, especially amid American perceptions and misunderstandings pertaining to African culture. While one cannot deny that violence against women and a deeply engrained patriarchal structure exists in some African societies, we seldom consider womankind's own ingenuity in circumnavigating these structures and rebelling when deemed necessary and appropriate.

Some critics have praised strong women as they gain more agency and climb the ranks within many different professional fields, while others have

difficulty coping with these changes, particularly to familial responsibilities being delegated between the sexes. Professor Oseni Taiwo Afisi praises traditional African culture for its strong reliance on the principle of equality—compartmentalizing tasks based on the strengths of each gender without hierarchy—while also demonizing women, labeled empowered within his piece “ Power and Womanhood in Africa: An Introductory Evaluation”. He states that these women, by choosing to stray away from what he views as familial obligations in order to pursue careers outside of the domestic sphere, endanger morality. He credits lapses in morality, as seen through “ cultism in our schools, corruption in all fields of our lives and electoral fraud in our polity” to a lack of strong familial structure with the female fulfilling domestic responsibilities (Afisi 236).

While Afisi’s praises of the magic of womanhood should be noted, it seems as if he romanticizes the role of women within traditional African society quite a bit for his own intellectual and argumentative gain. He makes an effort to commend women who have become political leaders such as Africa’s first female president Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia and economic leaders such as “ managing directors of banks, insurance, and also directors of general public corporations” but criticizes these women for not adequately performing their roles of wives and mothers.

Perhaps his most problematic argument stems from the concept that equality had been reached within Africa before colonial powers influenced the nation. He argues that due to colonialism, women have been placed on a lower rung to make way for capitalism, globalization, need for power, superiority, and “ compartmentalization of roles and responsibilities with <https://assignbuster.com/he-falls-apart-the-art-of-female-subversion-in-african-literature/>

different values attached to them” (Afi 234). He insists that women now occupy passive roles due to colonization: female children uneducated because of the implication that they will become young brides, domestic violence running rampant and women having little very little parental rights over their children.

While colonial powers definitely played a role in furthering this gender divide, as we see in works such as *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with the relationship between Eugene and Beatrice, it did exist before colonial powers emerged. The beginning of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe takes place before colonial intervention, showing an Igbo society prior to European influence, then during the introduction of it. In this piece, there is still oppression and violence against women, specifically tied to a type of toxic masculinity represented by the main character Okonkwo. The preference of masculinity over femininity within this society is not only seen through Okonkwo’s violence against his wives, but also through the usage of feminine as an insult and the gendering of particular crops. Yams are often described as a masculine crop within the text, signifying not only their heartiness and the strength needed to harvest the vegetable, but also the economic importance of the vegetable to the society. Legumes are described as feminine because they are supplemental, easy to harvest, and economically insignificant in comparison to yams.

Afi also makes an effort to defend perhaps one of the most harmful aspects of the patriarchal familial structure in African culture—polygamy—by insisting that polygamy remains the best structure for “achieving family social and economic stability” within a culture where on average more  
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females are born than males (Afsi 231). He uses a quote by B. Dobson to bolster his argument which states that women “ might otherwise never enjoy the status and benefits which accompany becoming a mother, a bearer of children” (Afsi 232). The issue stems from the lack of choice within this arrangement. While some women would benefit from more economic stability and affluence in exchange for child rearing, other women would perhaps take a different path if given the opportunity. Women, within this idealistic traditional society that Afsi presents, still do not have equal rights because they are not given the same amount of choices as men, and are still pigeonholed to one specific path instead of given the opportunity to explore different paths.

With attitudes such as Afsi’s promoting a return to traditional values, despite the fact that several times within his piece he identifies some of these values as oppressive towards the female sex, one can start to gain insight into how important women writing about women (as well as men writing well developed female characters) has become in this modern time. Without catalogues of lived experiences, the complexities of womanhood can be lost, especially upon a modern reader who seeks to understand each side to the narrative in its entirety.

Writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Chinua Achebe have both brought voice to African women who perhaps would not have had their narratives told otherwise. While Achebe’s “ Things Fall Apart” centers around a male narrator, he provides rich characterization to the female characters, refusing to succumb to stereotypes. He also provided a platform for female writers to exercise their voices in his short story anthology. Adichie, a <https://assignbuster.com/he-falls-apart-the-art-of-female-subversion-in-african-literature/>

feminist Catholic Igbo writer, offers a unique perspective particularly through her piece “ Purple Hibiscus” which follows the maturation of Kambili, her softspoken narrator.

Aunty Ifeoma, Eugene’s widowed sister, represents a pivotal foil to Beatrice’s submissiveness and adherence to the status quo. While Beatrice embodies the peacekeeper within the family—a woman who picks up the remains of messes her husband makes—Ifeoma pays little attention to whether she ruffles her brother’s sensitive feathers, especially pertaining to how she addresses him. During the family’s time in Abba, Ifeoma points out that “ everybody in Abba will tell Eugene only what he wants to hear. Do our people not have sense? Will you pinch the finger of the hand that feeds you?” (Adichie 96) Ifeoma, though freedom gained through sad circumstance, has gained freedom within the way she lives her life. No one monitors how loudly she can laugh, or how often she can grin widely with her gapped teeth. Ifeoma insists to Beatrice that sometimes “ life begins when marriage ends” showing that she has genuinely gained a new lease on life, contradicting Afisi’s argument previously stated that polygamy benefits women, because a woman unmarried cannot enjoy status, benefits, or cultural respect (Adichie 75). Aunty Ifeoma teaches at the university, and while she admits her life is not easy, she insists that she remains genuinely happy within her life choices. She refuses to ask her brother for aid because as an intelligent, educated woman, she understands that dependence on her brother to provide for her strips her of her autonomy. She understands that within this structure of control Eugene has established, and society has

reinforced, she surrenders certain freedoms just by admitting that she could use his assistance financially or otherwise.

While Eugene remains the symbolic figurehead of patriarchy within the family, patriarchy exists in other forms as well, exhibited through the “Roman Catholic Church, education, and the State” (Stobie 421). Adichie argues that toxic masculinity and unchecked patriarchal power leads to political corruption, unlike Afisi who argues that political corruption can be credited to women who have stretched themselves too thin, trying to adhere to their cultural responsibilities as mother and wife while pursuing their own ambitions.

The other main elderly male character, Papa-Nnukwu, gains reader’s admiration within the text. Despite his casual sexism, stating that once he dies his spirit will intercede for Ifeoma to find her a good man to take care of her and the children, he remains a sympathetic character due to his good nature, generosity towards Kambili and Jaja, and willingness to forgive his tyrannical son who has casted him off for his traditionalism which he labels as paganism (Adichie 83). Adichie does not deny that flaws exist within this type of traditionalism, but seems to favor it to the fanatical Catholicism showed within Eugene’s character. She seeks to contradict Afisi’s earlier point that sexism within African culture is a new phenomenon by juxtaposing these men within the same piece, showing that both the modern, post-colonial, democratic, Catholic culture and the traditional, pagan, Igbo culture are sexist in one way or another.

There is something to also be said about how Ifeoma interacts with her elderly father. While remaining respectful towards him, she does subvert his casual sexism with tiny sarcasms and truths about her lives. When told that he would help her find a good man to take care of her after death, she responds that she would his spirit hasten her “ promotion to senior lecturer” showing that she does not expect a man to provide for her, and knows the means to better provide for herself (Adichie 83). Earlier within that scene, she also contradicts her father when he states that within education, because she is a woman, she does not count. This particular section remains important and outlines the innate sexism that still exists. Despite Ifeoma and Eugene receiving the same exact education through missionary schools, Eugene has found power through the male dominated Catholic church, while Ifeoma cannot receive a promotion at the university to help care for her children. Ifeoma responds to his casual sexism in a light, teasing way, without sharply criticizing her father.

Another element to consider when discussing female subversion is Adichie herself. The piece slowly unravels like the unfurling of a hibiscus within a garden, only with time the flower does not grow more beautiful but more violent, revealing complexities and contradictions within Eugene’s character over time. In the beginning, there are soft, subtle hints about Eugene’s violent impulses—he is not written in a way that automatically assigns him the role of villain. The opening scene within the novel shows Eugene throwing the church missal and shattering Beatrice’s ballerina figurines to pieces in reaction to the Jaja’s actions in mass. The love sips showing that Kambili has developed an understanding of love as painful and earned. Then,



Adichie slowly escalates the violence, dropping hints about bruises on Beatrice and explaining how she miscarries, a repercussion for the merciless beatings from Eugene. Finally, Adichie unveils the scope of Eugene's abuses, showing his full physical violence when he whips his family when Kambili breaks the Eucharistic fast, and forces Kambili and Jaja to soak their feet in boiling water as punishment for visiting their grandfather. Slowly unveiling this violence overtime is one way that Adichie makes the piece feel more believable, like a portrait of a family falling to pieces. By not assigning Eugene as villain immediately, she allows the reader to come to their own conclusions about the character. This slow progression buildup also makes the ending feeling within reach instead of farfetched.

Adichie also makes use of a young, naïve narrator at the cusp of her naivety. She does not model the narrator from her own beliefs but instead uses her as a blank slate for the ideas surrounding her. Perhaps, Adichie uses both of these techniques, the slow unfolding of violence and the naïve narrator, to place an objective lens on the story and to protect herself from heavy critique. When faced with the accusation that her novel read as feminist, she did not shy away from the content she chose to write, but instead, stood proudly behind her novel, not refusing the label of feminist. While receiving plenty of critique for this decision from men and women alike, she does not waver in her beliefs, which help to color her fiction in a new way.

Similarly, within *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe had a tremendous responsibility in the way that he chose to tell the narrative to include female voice that felt authentic. He includes two particularly subversive female characters within the piece: one of Okonkwo's wives Ekwefi and her only daughter Ezinma.

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While the plotline with Ezinma reinforces the preference of males within the society, Okonkwo seeing many good traits within Ezinma which could be used to the fullest if she had been born male instead, it also presents the reader with a type of paradox. Why waste these precious skills, quick-wit and intellect? Why sentence Ezinma to a life of being a third wife when her capabilities stretch far past taking menial orders? Okonkwo, knowing that her quick wit will be viewed as mutiny instead of prized and used to better society, attempts to shut it out of her. He holds a soft spot for her, particularly because of this intellect but also her physical vulnerabilities, particularly after he experiences his own vulnerabilities in full later in the piece.

Another act of subversion in the piece takes place when Ezinma's mother Ekwefi, sneaks out in spite of warnings to stay and sleep, to check on her daughter while the priestess treats her. This action, an act of passion not stemming from a rejection of the societal norms, but from love of her daughter and want to see her, remains an interesting act to analyze within the piece. There is more empathy within this situation than when Okonkwo's other wife left cooking dinner to fix her hair before the festivities, though both women come from a central point of wanting to do what they want. One, however, can be explained within a cultural context by the passions of a mother who fears losing her child while the other assumes selfishness on the mother's part. It seems that even rebellion here is monitored through a motherly lens: women can act out if it still remains in the best interest of the family.

With excellent representation of women within classic African literature, readers and critics alike can better understand the lived experience of an African woman, which ripples through polity choices and social attitude towards women obtaining more public sphere influence. While it seems not everyone is completely ready for pieces like *Purple Hibiscus* which bring to light the extent of oppression that can exist and how easily a victim of this violence and manipulation can be convinced that this is the only way their lives can unfurl, texts like this remain absolutely pivotal for understanding, persuading, and giving light to a narrative that has been largely ignored. It also abandons the Eurocentric notion that African women must be saved from the society they live in, because these women are strong enough to subvert society on their own in the ways they deem fit. Characters like Ifeoma and Ezima ripple the current of the pieces they are placed in, causing the narrative to change around them. Beatrice and Kambili gain strength to understand how dangerous Eugene's presence within their lives has become, and Okonkwo is forced to show vulnerability through Ezima and Ekwifi's presence. The ripple continues when these authors stand by the choices they have made in their works, not allowing critics to undermine the successes in their pieces.