

The place of women in igbo society (things fall apart) essay sample



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Women are often thought of as the weaker, more vulnerable of the two sexes. Thus, women's roles in literature are often subdued and subordinate. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, women are repressed by an entrenched structure of the social repression. Women suffer great losses in this novel but, also in certain circumstances, hold tremendous power. Achebe provides progressively changing attitudes towards women's role. At first glance, the women in *Things Fall Apart* may seem to be an oppressed group with little power and this characterization is true to some extent. However, this characterization of Igbo women reveals itself to be prematurely simplistic as well as limiting, once the reader uncovers the diverse roles of the Igbo women throughout the novel. The recurring themes of gender conflicts help drive the novel by showing how important women are to the men, yet they don't receive the treatment they deserve. Although the women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are viewed in an inferior light by the Igbo men, there are also occurrences which showcase their strength and importance in the society.

All over the world, especially in developing countries, women are not treated as equals. It is not any different in the Nigerian society portrayed by Chinua Achebe. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe represents the female characters as they existed in Igbo culture, which is without power but often emotionally strong. Although traditional Igbo culture is fairly democratic in nature, it is also profoundly patriarchal. The world in *Things Fall Apart* is one in which patriarchy intrudes oppressively into every sphere of existence. It is a world where the man is everything and the woman nothing. Igbo culture regarded women as gentle, weak, and obedient to their men. The woman's job was in

the house taking care of the children, preparing the meals and raising easy crops, while the men did brave things such as fighting, hunting, and raising difficult crops. In domestic terms, women are quantified as part of men's acquisition.

As wives, women come in multiple numbers, sandwiched between yam barns and titles. These three, wives, yam barns, social titles- are the highest accolades for the successful farmer, warrior, and man of worth. These determine a man's social status, as illustrated by Nwakibie, a man in Okonkwo's village, who has three barns, nine wives and thirty children and the highest but one title which a man can take in the clan (18). The society that Achebe is describing is an agrarian one in which the crop- the yam- is synonymous with virility. Achebe explains that this important crop stands for manliness and was a " man's crop" whereas coco-yam, of smaller size and lesser value than other yams is regarded as female (23). This gender discrimination reinforces the notion that Igbo men are superior to women of their tribe. Consequently, to produce an abundant harvest, the traditional farmer needs a good workforce.

Women constitute the core of the rural workforce by farming, tending animals, nurturing children, among other activities. They " weeded the farm three times at definite periods" (33). In fact, their extensive and strenuous labor makes possible the agrarian society Achebe portrays. Achebe depicts the stereotypical vision of women in *Things Fall Apart* through some male characters, one of them being Okonkwo. Okonkwo strives to make his way in a world that seems to value manliness. His whole life was dominated by the fear of becoming like his father Unoka, who was a failure. He associated <https://assignbuster.com/the-place-of-women-in-igbo-society-things-fall-apart-essay-sample/>

Unoka with weakness, and with weakness he associates femininity while masculinity is associated with strength. In the Igbo society, feminine concepts and words are used to refer to weak things. So it is no coincidence that the word “ Agbala” was not only the name for a woman but was also referred to a man with no title (13).

A representative of society at large, Okonkwo views women as weak and foolish. Osugo, a fellow clansman has taken no title and in a gathering of his peers, Okonkwo unkindly tells him, “ This meeting is for men”, referring to Osugo as a woman (26). In addition, it is an insult to a man or boy if they possess any female qualities. Guilt ridden after murdering Ikemefuna, his surrogate son, Okonkwo sternly reprimands himself not to “ become like a shivering old woman” – this he considers the worst insult (65). Okonkwo also relates negatively to his oldest son Nwoye, who according to Okonkwo possess weak qualities and thus acts like a woman. He wanted Nwoye to listen to “ masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” rather than the stories told by women which were for “ foolish women and children” (54). The stories that men told were about bravery and war and young men were expected to listen to this instead of fairy tales that women told.

“ So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land” – while Nwoye feigned that he liked the stories his father told him to make him a man, he preferred his mother’s that he heard while growing up that kept his spirit gentle. Okonkwo has three wives, who are the primary female figures in Things Fall Apart. His three wives each hold varying roles of importance in the household just as they do in the novel. The characterization of Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s second wife, almost seems

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insignificant to one reading from a patriarchal standpoint, but when reevaluated, one will find that she is a well of knowledge, love, and fierce independence. Although she was married to another man, Ekwefi was bold enough to accept her strong desire for Okonkwo and abandon her husband to be with him. She has endured much heartache and stigmatism. She is considered a cursed woman because after ten live births, only one of her child – a daughter-survives.

However, instead of continuing to lament her adversity, Ekwefi devotes her time and energy to the one child who does live, and finds solace in her relationship with her daughter, Ezinma. Ezinma is one young girl who elicits pure love from all the lives she touches, even her father, Okonkwo. However, he cannot fully appreciate Ezinma as a person: “ She should have been a boy, he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter . . . If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit” (64, 66). Instead of admiring her for her strength and disposition as a burgeoning woman, Okonkwo is saddened by the fact that she is not male. All three of Okonkwo’s wives “ live in perpetual fear of his fiery temper” (13). They are never to act without orders or question them when they are given, illustrating the level of submissiveness a woman must display to be socially acceptable. In the second chapter, Okonkwo brings Ikemfuna, a prisoner of war with a neighboring clan, into his home until the clan decides what should be done with him.

Okonkwo tells his senior wife to look after him. She asks if the captive will be staying for a long period of time. And Okonkwo furiously replies, “ Do what you are told, woman” (14). In addition, a man is not believed to be “ manly”
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if he can not control his women. Thus we see that wife beating is an accepted practice. Okonkwo frequently beats his wives, and the only emotion he allows to display is anger. Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, was given a sound beating because she merely cut a few leaves of the banana tree. In another incident, he beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo, because she goes out to get her hair plaited and does not return in time to cook the afternoon meal. However, the only reason he gets punished is because it is the week of peace. In fact, it is often encouraged that men beat their women for punishment of "wrongdoings" and the women have no recourse against it. Okonkwo's attitude towards his wives is indicative of intolerance for women, the association of weakness and femininity and thus intolerance of women and womanly characteristics. In Addition, women can not meaningfully participate in social affairs as the men do.

A similar near-invisibility of women in *Things Fall Apart* is acknowledged by the omniscient narrator. Describing a communal ceremony, he confesses, "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (87). The mediocrity of the women is so rooted in their culture that women hardly ever challenged it but simply accepted it as a way of life. For centuries, African women languished on the fringe of their universe – neglected, exploited, degenerated, and indeed made to feel like outsiders. When Achebe writes on the tradition of the "egwugwu", he states, "These women never saw the inside of the hut. No women ever did.....No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan" (88). Yet, women were the one to scrub and paint the outside walls

of the hut under the supervision of men. This is a depiction of the degrading treatment of women in the Umuofian society. On one hand, Achebe shows that women were denied social status but he also presents incidents which demonstrated the hidden respect for women in this culture.

In the communal ceremony, Achebe chooses a case involving a woman's well-being; he tries to show that a woman's place in Igbo society, though vulnerable, is not always unappreciated. One can also analyze that there was some sort of justice for women and their protection. In one of the incidents in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's refusal to reconcile himself to the turn of events that led to his exile provides an occasion for a reminder of the significance of the female principal, at least at the level of connotation, when he is instructed by Uchendu, his maternal uncle, in the culture's admiration of the mother as source of life; "It's 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. Your mother is there to protect you" (134). It is in this statement that we witness the contradictory placing of women within Igbo society.

The culture associates femininity with the vital principal is enunciated in resolute terms in the dictum "Nneka"- Mother is supreme. As a caretaker, as a comforter, woman, or what the notion of woman denotes is held in high esteem. Yet the qualities that the idea of woman connotes within the society, such as weakness, are vilified. Women are praised in their capacities as wives and mothers but were not believed intelligent enough for any other role. One such example is Anasi's role as Nwakibia's first wife which is one of <https://assignbuster.com/the-place-of-women-in-igbo-society-things-fall-apart-essay-sample/>

great respect. She is regarded nearly as a queen, wearing the anklet of her husband's titles. She presides over the other wives of her husband and keeps them under control. Although women seem to play an inferior role in society, many traditions exemplify the value and importance of women to males in society. Women are actually the unseen power behind the mighty Umuofian tribe.

They may be seen as subservient and weak, yet women are supreme in matters of life and death. An example of powerful women in the Igbo culture is found in the role they play in the Igbo religion. The women routinely perform the role of priestess. Although most of the men in the society viewed women as weak, they put their complete trust in a woman representative of the Oracle which sometimes directed their every move and whom they consulted every time an important decision was to be made. The narrator recalls that during Okonkwo's boyhood, "the priestess in those days was a woman called Chika. She was full of power of her god, and she was greatly feared" (17). The present priestess is Chielo, "the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the hill and the Caves" (49). There is an episode during which Chielo has come for Okonkwo and Ekwefi's daughter, Ezinma. Achebe writes, "Okonkwo pleaded with her to come back in the morning because Ezinma was asleep." The priestess screamed, 'Beware, Okonkwo!' she warned" (101).

There is no other point in the novel in which we see Okonkwo "plead" with anyone else, male or female. The fact that Okonkwo allows this is evidence of the priestess's power. The ability of a woman to occupy the role of a priestess, a spiritual leader, reveals a clear degree of reverence for women

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being present in the Igbo society. Another depiction of such reverence for women is unveiled in the representation of the earth goddess, Ani. Ani is described as playing “ a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct” (36). Ani’s power is further illustrated through her role in the yam harvest. It is important that all members of the clan observe the week of peace prior to the harvest in order “ to honor great goddess of the earth without whose blessing [their] crops will not grow” (30). For a female spirit to possess such an important role in the success of the yam crop is indicative of the actual deep-rooted power of women. However voiceless and powerless as she might have been, an Igbo woman nonetheless had “ important roles”. We also see women in their role as educators. They were the primary educators of children.

Through storytelling and other forms of discourse, they educate and socialize the children, inspiring in them intellectual curiosity about social values, relationships and the human condition. The narrator describes, “ Low voices, broken now and again by singing, reached Okonkwo from his wives’ huts as each woman and her children told folk stories” (96). It is through storytelling that the children learn important lessons about nature and human condition, are taught the Igbo creation of myths, such as the birds and the tortoise story, and master the art of communicating by retelling the stories themselves. The women help develop the artistic consciousness of the children, in addition to entertaining them.

These diverse roles of women in *Things Fall Apart* show that women are the foundation of the clan and its people. They are the constant that can be relied upon; they are the nurturers and caretakers of the people. These are <https://assignbuster.com/the-place-of-women-in-igbo-society-things-fall-apart-essay-sample/>

not insignificant, powerless roles. Women in *Things Fall Apart* may appear to be unfairly limited in terms of their authority and power. However, upon delving beneath this deceiving surface, one can see that the women of the clan hold some powerful positions; spiritually as the priestess, symbolically as the earth goddess, and literally as the nurturers of the Igbo people, the caretakers of the yam crops and the mother and educators of the Igbo children.