

# CONJUNCTURE, HYPERMASCULINITY AND DISAVOWAL IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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**Chinua Achebe**

**deconstruction**

**gender**

**historicism**

**novel**

**patriarchy**

**Things Fall  
Apart**

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Discerning and eloquent critics have given us a vocabulary to describe the rhetorical achievement of *Things Fall Apart*. Distinguishing Achebe from other early anglophone African writers, critics locate his genius in his exploitation of the novel as a form for historicizing the Igbo past and writing 'Africa' into 'world history'. Abiola Irele observes, for example, that *Things Fall Apart* provides 'an image of an African society reconstituted as a living entity and in its historic circumstances, an image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meaning and values' (2001: 115). Simon Gikandi similarly underscores the novel's success in illustrating 'a fundamental linkage between a mode of production, a system of beliefs and a kinship structure' (1991: 29). These and other critical accounts attribute Achebe's status in the critical tradition as the founder of an anglophone canon of African writing to his provision of a materialist rationale for traditions hitherto unrecognized by an international audience as such. Surpassing the romanticism of Solomon Plaatje and the fabulism of

1 Among other institutions, Amadiume describes the role of *ekwe* which she translates as 'female husband' allowed enterprising women farmers to acquire access to other women's labour-power and childbearing capacity through marriage. Interestingly, the case history of Nwambata Aku described by Amadiume has resonance for Achebe's novel because the fate of her second husband, Eze Okigbo (who was her first husband's son), bears close resemblance to that of the fictional Okonkwo. Oral histories recorded by Amadiume state that Eze Okigbo, a 'big man' of Nnobi (near where both Achebe and Amadiume come), having heard many bad stories, vowed never to set eyes on white people. When he refused to see a colonial administrator, he was taken to the marketplace and publicly whipped. Unable to bear this humiliation, Eze Okigbo returned to his homestead, took poison and died, like Achebe's fictional hero, in an act of suicide. I draw attention to this story as much for the differences as the similarities between

Amos Tutuola, critics credit Achebe's Africanized realism with decisively addressing and refuting the European tradition of racist representation of the continent's peoples as 'merely instinctual' and, therefore, inhuman.

Yet if, as Lewis Nkosi has suggested, history is the hero of *Things Fall Apart* (Stratton 1994: 22), the novel, as Irele reminds us, is not a history 'in any ordinary sense of the word' (2001: 149). *Things Fall Apart* provides a detailed and vivid portrait of nineteenth-century life in Igboland but does not feature historical personae or events. Nor, despite Gikandi's claim, does it reflect Igbo kinship structures in an anthropologically accurate way. In her *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* a text which cogently illustrates the economic and social means by which nineteenth-century Igbo women could accrue wealth and social authority Ifi Amadiume has disabused Achebe's readers of the notion that his masculinized representation conforms in any historically accurate way to an Igbo past.<sup>1</sup> But even if we put aside, for the moment, the considerable divergences between African feminist anthropology and the representation of Igbo kinship structures in Achebe's novel, its selective justification of particular Igbo customs as the rational expression of a historical material order would not be enough to explain Achebe's social authority and international success in mediating the novel as a 'global' form. Okonkwo's apparent verisimilitude notwithstanding, *Things Fall Apart* comprises an element other than the historical image of the past, of which we, as readers, need to take account. The novel's history-effect lies less, I would argue, in the vivid portrait of Okonkwo's life in nineteenth-century Umuofia than in the temporal movement of its 'heterodiegetic narrative' (Gikandi 1991: 45).

As Gikandi observes, the fact that 'the narrator is not a character in the narrated situations and events' allows for 'shifting focalization' (45) in the novel and the provision of multiple perspectives on characters and events. Since the narrative does not provide any biographical information about the character who relates it, Gikandi views his/her social location as unimportant.<sup>2</sup> However, I would suggest that ethnographic comments addressed to a non-Igbo audience implicitly situate the narrator much later in time in a moment proximate to the present one. What's more, the implied temporal distance between the narrator and other characters in *Things Fall Apart*, between the historical setting of the story and the moment of its enunciation, generates a chronological gap across which a historical consciousness manifests itself. To put this in other words, we might recognize that since historians place more value on the differences than the similarities that accumulate across time,<sup>3</sup> the narrator's apparent sociocultural difference from Okonkwo may be the novel's most beguiling fiction. While furnishing readers with a fictional sense of temporal movement and historical change, the fictional representation of sociocultural difference between Okonkwo and the narrator which facilitated the contemporary re-evaluation of Igbo

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the historical and fictional figures. Like the fictional Okonkwo, Eze Okigbo practised polygamy and married 13 wives. Yet unlike Okonkwo's wives whom the novel represents as generally submissive and dependent on his labor, some of Eze Okigbo's wives, especially Nwambata Aku, were extremely wealthy and powerful in their own right in the community. According to Amadiume, Nwambata Aku herself had married 24 wives and her wealth entitled her to rights of veto in village constitutional assemblies. In Amadiume's account, she was more wealthy and, in many ways, more powerful than Okigbo himself. See Amadiume (1987: 45-8).

2 Gikandi (1991: 45) suggests that 'our concern should not be with the personality of this narrator, nor his/her identity; rather, our emphasis should be on how this narrator functions in the text.'

3 According to Madhavi Menon, the historicist desire for authenticity leads to the hasty rejection of

customs for Achebe's twentieth-century audience secures the critical fantasy that the novel depicts Igbo society in what Abdul JanMohamed describes as 'an objective rather than idealist or subjective manner' (cited in Stratton 1994: 32).

It is within the context of this dramatization of historical consciousness that I return here to the extensive critical debates about gender in the novel. For the temporal gap in the narrative which blocks any affective synthesis between the narrator and Okonkwo precipitates, I would argue, Achebe's most significant formal innovation. This innovation consists in the reconfiguration of Pan-African nationalist arguments for unity across the categories of gender rather than chronology. If, in most novels, the temporal movement of the plot provides the narrative space for the ideological resolution of differences among characters who represent divergent values, the historical imperative of *Things Fall Apart* alternatively requires the preservation of an ideological gap – albeit drawn in terms of a temporal one – between Okonkwo and the narrator. The novel thus works out its ideological conflict and negotiated resolution not across chronological time but across parallel and simultaneous 'realist' and 'romantic' or 'oral' and 'written' gender ideologies.<sup>4</sup> In fact, I would argue, furthermore, that it is only by refashioning nineteenth-century Igbo gender regimes within the binary and oppositional parameters of a supposedly 'world-historical' model that Achebe succeeds in rendering the Igbo past recognizable to his international readership.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is manly and gender is dual, or so most critics agree. While Florence Stratton has stringently critiqued the novel for what she represents as its ahistorical patriarchal bias, other critics, including Irele and Biodun Jeyifo (1993b), have provided a more textured account of gender differences and the system of gender differentiation in the novel. While these critics recognize Okonkwo's misogyny, they do not view his 'aggressively masculinist' (Jeyifo 1993b: 855) personality as representative. For Irele, for instance, Okonkwo's hypermasculinity repels the narrator and threatens to upset the balance of gender values in Umuofia. 'We are more than once alerted', he maintains, 'to the fact that Okonkwo's adoption of the manly ideal is excessive and even wrongheaded, as when Obierika emphatically expresses to Okonkwo himself his lack of enthusiasm for the prowess in wrestling demonstrated by his own son, Maduka' (2001: 130). Similarly, Jeyifo, reading Okonkwo in comparison to his son, Nwoye – who, unlike his father, only outwardly accepts the masculinist codes of Igbo warriorhood – discerns 'divergent, conflicting constructions of maleness' (1993b: 855) in the novel as either biological or socially determined. Like Irele, Jeyifo emphasizes Okonkwo's deformation of traditional gender models: 'Okonkwo both loathes the memory of his father and represses the lore of his mother; in the process he distorts both the "masculine" and

apparent similarities between the past and present moments which are construed as the wilful projections of a narcissistic imagination. By convention, it is only by stressing the differences of the past from the present moment that a historical text may authenticate itself. See Menon (2008: 1–25).

4 I borrow from Irele (2001: 140) the oppositions 'realist' and 'romantic' to describe the novel's 'written' and 'oral' discourses, respectively.

the "feminine", by keeping them rigidly apart and by the ferocity of his war on the "feminine" (1993b: 851).

Although Jeyifo reads the novel as incontrovertibly male-centred, in delineating the difference between biological status and gender performance in the novel, he recognizes and illustrates its admission of the possibility for postcolonial Africa of recovering a female tradition that 'WILL NOT BE subsumed within the male-dominated tradition' (852; Jeyifo's capitalization). In a similar vein, Irele discerns a 'disavowal of Okonkwo at the level of the novel's system of connotations' (2001: 130). Neither critic wishes to derealize the hero; rather, both seem to agree that the salvation of the tradition eventually rests not on Okonkwo but on the restoration, for the community, of the gender balance which he threatens to derail. Although, for Jeyifo, this possibility remains outside the purview of the narrative itself, for Irele, the text finally exercises a reparative function rhetorically through its reinstatement of a 'romantic' and binary gender dialectic rather than historically through the reconciliation of past and present moments. Irele claims, for instance, that the 'male-female dialectic [in the novel] serves to maintain an affective and ideological balance in the group; in this, it corresponds to a certain primary perception of a felt duality of the cosmic order as a principle of the universal imagination' (2001: 132). Here, Irele deploys an abstract male-female dialectic to transpose the localized and historical setting of communal relationships in the novel onto an ahistorical cosmic plane. By tying gender dualism in the novel to cosmic principles, the critic externalizes the ethical consciousness of the culture group, conferring eternal life upon it. Yet if he concludes this sentence (259) with a superscripted indexical reference to a footnote which shows the indebtedness of his conception of gender dualism to Claude Lévi-Strauss, then perhaps it's not surprising that the paradigmatic articulation of gender dualism in the novel occurs for him in the episode of Chielo's abduction of Ezinma, which Stratton has identified as its most Eurocentric. As Stratton (1994: 30) has demonstrated, Chielo embodies an archetypal femininity drawn from a European and Judaeo-Christian genealogy (constructed upon the biblical character Eve) which includes the principal and unnamed female African characters in Rider Haggard's *She* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

While Stratton's attention to the assimilation of European gender models in the novel is warranted, I think we should reject her assertion that Achebe reconciles his female characters to passive roles. In reading the novel as one which legitimizes male domination, Stratton's lack of responsiveness to irony in the narrative perhaps equals only Okonkwo's. I cannot agree with her that Achebe legitimizes male domination. What surprises me, though, is how the narrative occludes endogenous models of female agency and power by deploying the heterodiegetic narrative structure ironically to foreshadow and anticipate the domestication of feminist individualism in Nigeria.

Take, for instance, Irele's argument that it is inappropriate for Okonkwo to regret that Ezinma is a girl. For Irele, the narrative function of Chielo's abduction of Ezinma restores the gender dialectic in the novel by recuperating Okonkwo's daughter for a 'feminine' realm. The abduction, he claims, is 'Chielo's way of designating Ezinma as her successor, of reclaiming the girl and restoring her to a realm of feminine mysticism from which she is beginning to be separated by Okonkwo's projection upon her of a male essence' (2001: 131). For this claim to be true, we would need to find some evidence in the novel that feminine mysticism is Ezinma's proper vocation. But does any exist?

Although Ezinma is an *ogbanje*, for instance, that condition may affect boys as well as girls (Bastian 2002: 59).<sup>5</sup> And despite the actions of Ezinma's parents and wider community to mitigate her *ogbanje* nature, we are never given reason to believe that Ezinma herself feels in any way connected to an extra-historical world. In fact, if she takes her mother, Ekwefi, for her role model, we may rather suspect her of the opposite. The prototype of rationalist individualism, Ekwefi consistently evinces a refreshing scepticism about the patriarchal organization of communal and religious authority in Umuofia. She easily recognizes Okonkwo, for example, behind an *egwugwu* mask. She also disobeys the elders by giving Ezinma eggs to eat, even continuing to do so in secret after Okonkwo forbids it. And Ezinma clearly enjoys the subterfuge. On one hand, the subversive acts of mother and daughter coupled with other moments of ironic foreshadowing which anticipate, among other things, the entrenchment of British colonial power in Igboland, the rise of urban markets and even perhaps Western discourses of women's sexual liberation anticipate the class-based rise of feminist individualism. On the other hand, however, such anticipation eclipses Igbo women's opposition to the colonial imposition of Western bourgeois gender regimes on the population. As Amadiume (1987: 134-43) has pointed out, Igbo women rioted to such an extent against colonial regulations that stripped them of social and economic power between 1929 and 1930 that the riots became known as the Women's War. They rioted again in 1951, 1952 and in 1958, the year Achebe's novel was published. *Things Fall Apart* does not foreshadow the women's riots, nor does it represent the erosion of Igbo women's social power under colonial administrations. However, it does contain traces of a matriarchal Igbo culture in its account of titles and other customs.

While Stratton's disappointment with Achebe derives from her understanding of patriarchy as fixed, homogenous and unsusceptible to change across geopolitical contexts, Ifi Amadiume argues alternatively that patriarchy takes many different forms. In fact, Amadiume lucidly describes a dual-sex system of political organization in Igboland within which matriarchal and patriarchal social elements coexist. As Stratton acknowledges, this

5 Bastian, in fact, suggests that *ogbanje* children of either sex may occupy a third gender category.

6 Wairimu Ngaruiya Njaambi and William E. O'Brien, for instance, problematize Amadiume's attribution of male status to the principal women in woman-woman marriages.

7 Note that the narrative use of the term *agbala* and account of the 'traditional' or endogenous gender regime is inscribed within what Irele describes as the novel's 'realist' or 'Western' (rather than its 'romantic' or 'oral') discourse.

Igbo gender system allows persons of the female sex to become titled and effectively classified as male (as 'female husbands' or 'male daughters') for the purposes of acquiring or inheriting land and social status (Amadiume 1987: 42-68). While Amadiume's gendered language has been problematized and requires further consideration,<sup>6</sup> her account of the flexible and multiple, rather than binary, character of gender in Igboland, her insistence, prior to Butlerian analysis, on the lack of any inevitable connection between biology and sexed status, requires our attention to the traces of the pre-colonial gender regime in the novel which Stratton overlooks.

The narrator recounts, for instance, that Okonkwo's father, Unoka, having taken no title was socially regarded as *agbala*. *Agbala*, Okonkwo later learns to his dismay, is 'not only another word for a woman [but] could also mean a man who had taken no title' (Achebe 2001: 11). Here the narrative exposition of *agbala* suggests that maleness and femaleness exist in a hierarchical relation. What's more, the suggestion, implicit in the communal usage, that maleness is built upon, or an aggregate of, femaleness or that femininity is the ground of masculinity disarticulates the binary opposition of genders both in western regimes and in critical accounts of the novel. If Achebe's intermittent realist inscriptions of the dual-sex political system in the novel counter romantic scenes like that of Ezinma's abduction by Chielo where masculinity and femininity seem dialectically opposed, then it may be fair to suggest that there is not one but two gender regimes in the novel – each what we may call a 'traditional' (or endogenous) gender regime and a 'world-historical' (or Western) one<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the juxtaposition of two different gender regimes in the novel acts self-reflexively to critique the patriarchal implications of the male-female dialectic in the 'romantic' plot which associates femininity with mysticism, masculinity with rationalism and will. If the inscription of both endogenous and Western gender regimes in the novel also betrays the artificial or literary status of Okonkwo, then his hypermasculinity may allegorize the 'world-historical' self-amplification of the patriarchal subject. The novel's self-reflexive identification of Okonkwo as a stylized literary object rather than a historical person may allow us to define its object of disavowal, not as the oral tradition, as Irele suggests, but as contemporary Pan-African political culture. What sociopolitical consequences might such disavowal carry?

To conclude this brief reflection, I would like to explore Okonkwo's narrative function in marrying 'traditional' and 'world-historical' gender regimes in order to suggest that, while Achebe's novel echoes Pan-African nationalist discourse by reproducing and transmitting a founding myth of patriarchal origin, it also self-reflexively identifies this origin as a fetish. If *Things Fall Apart* adopts the patriarchal and conjunctural tropes of the modern discourses of culture heroism in order to challenge the authenticity and legitimacy of other contemporary figures, disavowal in the novel

registers self-consciousness and uncertainty about this project and its affinities to contemporary nationalist discourses.

According to Ato Quayson (2003), African nationalist leaders responded to the problem of ethnic particularism by departing from a strictly lineal conception of tradition in order to create trans-ethnic and conjunctural tropes of cultural heroism. While these tropes provided a 'positive reaffirmation' (Kirk-Greene, quoted in Quayson 2003: 46) of endogenous traditions, they were 'not always wholly derived from [endogenous] contexts' (46); more frequently, as Quayson notes, they comprised 'an assemblage of partial features' (49) from various sources. They might have conglomerated, for example, elements of endogenous culture (including, for instance, heroic praise names, textiles, animal symbolism) together with the revolutionary Pan-African rhetoric of the Americas in order to forge African self-images which were multicultural and modern. As Quayson observes, leaders faced with a crisis of legitimacy produced public self-images that pertained to the spheres of tradition in order to convey a fantasy of their organicity. While the leader's distinctive public image buttressed claims to national autonomy, it also served to suppress internal social divisions.

To recognize Okonkwo as the literary version of a conjunctural culture hero is to release Achebe from the protocols of authenticity and to acknowledge the novel's effort to furnish a hero who is both multicultural and modern. At the same time, Okonkwo's conjunctural status requires us to reflect further on his patriarchal function. For what Quayson's account of the tropes of culture heroism fails to acknowledge is their patriarchal status. Even as he recognizes the hero's sociopolitical function to unite the populations of African colonies across different and sometimes fractured socio- and ethnoscapes, he also describes the modern devaluation of the female culture hero and characteristic gender inequities within African nationalist cultural texts as an almost accidental 'recalcitrance toward change' (45) – a recalcitrance refracted in the social imaginary in terms of ambivalence about women's relative power or powerlessness. And while his 'subsegmental' (xxxiii) analysis of the culture hero affords us no 'straight-forwardly linear way' (55) of analysing the trope, I want to counter that claim by stressing the hero's patriarchal and fantasmatically patrilineal function to *conjoin* ethnicity and nation, organicity and sociality, the endogenous and the exogenous and, in this way, to mask the heterogeneous and sometimes matrilineal foundations of African social groups. If, as Biodun Jeyifo has suggested, Achebe conceived the nineteenth-century figure of Okonkwo in order to challenge the power of 'the African legatees who were poised to become the post-independence or "neo-colonial" ruling groups and classes' (1993a: 114), he could do so only because the sociocultural imaginary had already been primed to accept the myth of Africa's patriarchal origins.

To read Okonkwo as the literary reflection of and response to Pan-African national discourses of culture heroism in West Africa and as a conjunctural figure is to replace the notion that Achebe searches for an answer to his identity in the past with an acknowledgement that his novel self-consciously manifests the fabricated image of an ancestor drawn from the contemporary sociocultural imaginary, an ancestor assimilable to the ‘world-historical’ paradigms of national origin in modernity. At the same time, to recognize the layering and clash of ‘traditional’ and ‘world-historical’ gender regimes in Achebe’s novel is to affirm a formal antagonism there which raises questions about the structure of ‘African’ subjectivity. Formal antagonism in *Things Fall Apart* challenges the status of the novel’s ‘romantic’ or ‘oral’ discourse as the site of an ethical consciousness which implicitly stands ‘outside realism’, both preceding and superseding the nation-state, ‘enjoy[ing] stable self-coincidence’ (Santner 2005: 129) and immune to ideological processes. If critics sometimes externalize the novel’s ethical discourse in the mode of protecting the historical culture group (whether Igbo, Nigerian or African), troublingly, they often also eclipse those deconstructive elements of *Things Fall Apart* which question that group’s ethical coherence, historical unity and collective egoic identity.

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