

## NEGATIVE DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN *THINGS FALL APART*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study examines Negative Depiction of Women in Achebe's Things Fall Apart. It is a literature piece of work that dully portrays Africa., It was first published in 1958, and was directed to the colonialist as a response in the way they used to represent Africa and Africans in literature. The role of women in pre-colonial Africa is portrayed by Achebe in this work . Hence the position of women in native Nigerian societies at this time is viewed to be that of an assistant. The research utilized the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a means of analysis in order to reveal the true message of the literary text under study. The study revealed that the patriarchal paradigm that prevailed in the Igbo society then subjected women to a lower position in socio-political and economic hierarchy of Umuofia. Hence, women are depicted negatively.*

**KEY WORDS:** negative, depiction, gender, CDA, SFL

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## INTRODUCTION

Gender issues have become very crucial among scholars and critics. Gender identity is notoriously constructed by society with the help of different individuals, groups and social institutions with language as the basic tool. Individuals are transformed into subjects and complex identities given to them by ideologically complex social system of knowledge which takes its basis in common sense (Ghulam Ali and LubnaAkhlaq Khan 344). Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1992) have stated in *Constructing Meaning, Constructing Selves*, that people use language as a basic tool to construct themselves and others as “kinds” of people so that characteristics, attributes, duties and participation in social practice can be regularized (345).

Deborah Cameroon has noted that gender identities and gendered linguistic behaviours are acquired early in life. Gender is something you ‘have’ (Cameroon 484). Cameroon further states that linguistic gender differences are explained in terms of overarching social structures such as male dominance or separate gendered subculture. She opines that masculinities and femininities are produced in specific contexts or communities of practice in relation to local social arrangements. For feminist linguists who pioneered research on language and gender in the early 1970s, the issue was to show how language use was implicated in the process of becoming a woman, or a man. The linguistic gender differences these researchers sought to identify and explain were not treated as expressions of innate disposition of men and women, but as the result of patriarchal socialization which produced the two groups as different and unequal (484)

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Language is considered the vehicle for the transmission of cultural beliefs and values. The use of language reflects and affects both male and female relations in society. Smit defines language as a subject of cultural rules ‘enabling a person to engage in behaviours which will be considered meaningful by other members of the same society or societal group’ (103). Culture is an integral part of a society which Smit further defined as the learned system of rules, which governs the behaviour of members of a society. In any given culture, its members are expected to fulfill some roles according to their gender. According to Wickingson Danielle, ‘girls and boys alike learn a set of behaviours, attitudes, responsibilities and rights in accordance with their specific sex’ which are obvious outcomes of a culture (1). Newbourne Pascal also posits that:

It is conventional gender thinking to posit men as the perpetrators of female-oppression and discrimination in a society which is viewed as male-dominated, a society in which this sad scenario is ingrained in the fabric of the prevailing political regimes, and where the social, religious, political and economic relations and structures are arranged so as to embrace and promote inequality between men and women (Pascal 116).

In every culture, some linguistic asymmetries exist, which reveal the attitudes of the society towards the people based on their group gender (Matthew 217). Gerda Lerner cited in Butler maintains that, ‘gender is the costume, a mask, a strait jacket in which men and women dance that unequal dance’ (145). Gender is therefore, the outcome of human interactions, social life and the structure of a particular society. West and Zimmerman (1987) posit that gender is a human production just like culture and it is dependent on everyone constantly ‘doing gender’. In a society, one gender is usually superior to the other leading to structured inequality where the subordinate gender has less power, prestige and economic rewards than the valued and dominant gender.

The female gender is usually ‘depersonalized and socially constructed as secondary and subservient to the generic male gender’ (Moreblessings 116). The female gender is often presented as the sexually domesticated being; a weak vessel whose duties are to produce children and prepare food for the family. A man who fails to fulfill his roles in a society is usually referred to as a woman, which demonstrates the underlying attitudes towards women. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, it is stated, ‘No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man’ (53). Through this kind of linguistic gender construction, the idea of masculinity is obvious in all aspects of the Igbo society. Because women are disregarded in the patriarchal African society., It is common for the African women ‘to negotiate their identity through various platforms, and literature is one of them’ (Makokha 1). This is exactly what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* demonstrates by highlighting the numerous challenges faced by Nigerian women as they attempt to establish their place in the society.

The social construction of gender comes out of the general school of thought called social constructionism. Social constructionism proposes that everything people ‘know’ or see as ‘reality’ is partially, if not entirely, socially situated (Tom Andrew 2012). These basic theories of social

constructionism can be applied to any issue of study pertaining to human life, including gender study and categorization. Commenting on the construction of male and female genders in the autobiographical narratives, Ogunyemi, Christopher et. al. maintain that gender differences are created and sustained by the society through its traditional machinery, such as its conventions, norms, institutions and laws (99). The idea about male and female as it has to do with gender include traditional views that mark 'women as submissive, illogical, passive, talkative, emotional, easily given to tears, etc. Men on the other hand are assumed to be competent, logical and independent...' (Behringer 227-228). A social constructionist view of gender looks beyond categories and examines the intersections of multiple identities and the blurring of the boundaries between essentialist categories. This is especially true with regard to categories of male and female, which are viewed typically as binary and opposite.

One of the primary means in the expression of gender is speech. Kira Hall argues that 'linguistic performance both 'fits' the world as well as constitutes it' (372). In the same vein, Livia and Hall are of the view that the moment the announcement, 'it's a girl' is made; such a statement denotes gender (12). Duranti Alessandro believes that language can do things beyond the performative functions of verbs such as promise, pronounce and apologize (458). He states that some linguistic features can index, or point to a connection between a person and a place or a profession. In addition, he points out that the pronoun (he, she) which indexes a person's gender can affect the way the person is perceived. Parker and Sedgwick argue that performativity makes it possible for an in-depth appreciation of the ways identities are constructed in texts (2). The moment parents are asked to describe their 24 hours old infants, parents do so using gender-stereotypic language: boys are described as strong, alert and coordinated while girls are described as tiny, soft and delicate (Renzetti, and Curran 32). It has also been observed that there are a lot of linguistic resources and embodied performances that express gendered meaning such as pitch, intensity, and loudness (Smyth et al 32, 329-350). Sapir, Edward also holds that 'language is the medium of literature just as marble, bronze or clay are materials of sculpture' (222). In literature, language is employed in the construction of gender types and roles of each gender type are described using language.

Gender refers to roles, attributes and values assigned by culture and society to women and men. It is "the socially constructed roles of and relations between males and females" (Zola 16). Gender is often marked by unequal power relations that assign definite entitlements and responsibilities to men only. This leads to the emergence of gender sensitivity, a situation whereby people become aware of what others think about gender to challenge the orthodox views and assumptions of the roles of men and women in society. Gender sensitivity neutralizes the patriarchal status quo where 'men have social power in every important structure of society and ... women do not have any real access to such structures' (Zola 16). Gender sensitivity pays a great deal of attention to the various similarities and differences between men and women with respect to their experiences and viewpoints. Gender sensitivity is committed to giving equal value and opportunity to both men and women in society. In other words, it has to do with the awareness and the appreciation of the need to maintain at a reasonable level, the gender difference between the man and female.

In Nigeria, for instance, there is gender profiling which points at gender imbalance, gender inequality, gender bias and gender discrimination (Agbogu and Igbokwe 1). The interpretation of the above assertion is that males are favoured and treated preferentially to the detriment of their female counterparts (Okebukola 89). In the third world countries, men dominate virtually every aspect of governance and use their position and status to accumulate power and wealth. In Igbo culture for example, decision making has remained the prerogative of the masculine gender that is fondly called “Onyeisiala”. Ahituhu and Ajakor decry female subjugation by male. They assert that:

... women are excluded from some central activities crucial to humanity such as the defining activities of modern political identity, when men appeared to be granted by natural fiat. These included the right to take an active role in politics, government and leadership. The right to political representation, the right to education, the right to self-definition, the right to legal ownership and the right to bequeath an inheritance (769).

In African literature, there are folktales and stories that create negative impression about women. Stralton argues that female characters have been represented in a variety of ways, some of which include gender stereotypes and gender inequality (98). She further argues that male writers have encoded female characters as agents of moral corruption, contamination in the society and goddesses who lure men into destruction. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for instance, female characters are subdued in the face of their oppression under a patriarchal system. This is a typical masculine literary work where female characters are seen as auxiliary characters and their good deeds are overlooked. Even when Ezinma, a female character in the text shows a sense of brightness, Okonkwo wishes Ezinma were a boy (Achebe 45-122). This shows that success is never an attribute of female characters as portrayed by Achebe. In line with the foregoing, this study aims to investigate the negative depiction of Women in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Yagoub (2016) investigated *Gender Inequality and Power Relations in Achebe’s Novel Things Fall Apart*. The study was aimed at demonstrating how a close analysis of linguistic features can contribute to the comprehension of gender inequality, power relations, and ideological expressions in literary texts as depicted in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The analysis concentrates on the use of speech acts, requests and power, and expressions of diverse lexical choices. It also adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a research tool to account for minute detail of linguistic structures in the light of social and historical situations of a literary text to display consciousness, beliefs, and values which are embedded in the language. This study also adopted content analysis as a method of collecting data from the narrative and designed two tables, one for gender inequality and power relations and the other for the expressions of ideology. The findings revealed that 100% of linguistic expressions used by Okonkwo are in favour of the male while 0% of linguistic expressions are in favour of female.

Ho Wai Man Janet (2012) examined the relationship between language and gender from sociolinguistic perspective. The study examined the two classical studies conducted by Trugill

(1972) and Lakoff (1966) in Britain and the United States respectively. The study shows that men and women have different language patterns, and men's linguistic pattern is viewed as "unmarked form", and any deviation is regarded as "marked form". In addition, the study further reveal that women tend to use the standard form of a language more often than men do. Based on Trugill's and Lakoff's studies, the study further investigated the issue that men and women used language to perform their own genders, and meet the social expectations and gender roles imposed on them. The standard form and norms of a language can be considered "pure" and "good" which are associated with feminine characteristics that women are supposed to possess.

Ghulam Ali and Lubna Khan ((2012)also conducted a study. The objective of the study was to determine how language is used to construct stereotypical female identities, especially SMS discourse. Feminism and constructionism provided the theoretical perspective. Four hundred (400) messages were collected from different people belonging to both genders. Content analysis and feminist criticism were used as methods. It is found out from the critical analysis of the data collected that Pakistani females are portrayed in derogatory and deprecating terms and content. The linguistic and content analysis of the 400 mobile phone messages revealed that more than 90% of the messages portrayed women in a pessimistic and deprecating way by using linguistic devices and content, such as disparaging terms with sexual connotations, similes, metaphors, compliments, diminutive forms and self-incrimination by females and cartoons. Reproachful and negative language and content of these messages show and reinforce the negative attitudes and beliefs about females in our society; they are counterproductive and perpetuate low self-respect in females. It further reveals that female portrayals in SMS discourse do not show compatibility with religious and social values and norms but reinforces derogatory and negative stereotyping of females in print and electronic media.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research utilized the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as a means of analysis in order to reveal the true message of the literary text under study. These theories were used in the analysis of the text. CDA is a field of discourse that is used to analyze written and spoken texts to explore power relations, dominance, inequality and bias (NasirBukhari and Wang Xiaoyang 9). It critically evaluates how these discursive sources of power and dominance are maintained and reproduced within specific social, political, and historical contexts (see Van Dijk 1998). CDA, according Fairclough (1993), is a discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and process; to show how such practices, events, and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by the relations of power and struggles. It also explores how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society itself function as a factor for securing power and hegemony (135). CDA stemmed out from Critical Linguistics (CL) in the late 1970s. A group of linguists and literary theorists at the University of East Anglia played a pivotal role in developing critical linguistics (see Fowler et.al. 1979; Kress & Hodges, 1979). CL was based on Halliday's Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL). CL practitioners such as Trew aimed at 'isolating

ideology in discourse' and showing 'how ideology and ideological processes are manifested as systems of linguistic characteristics and processes' (155). This aim was pursued by developing CL's analytical tools (Fowler et al., 1979; Fowler 1991) based on SFL. CL practitioners following Halliday believed that language performs three functions: ideational, which refers to the structuring of experience of the speaker to transmit his world and its phenomena; interpersonal function which establishes a relationship between speakers and listeners, that is, personal and group relationships, while the textual function enables the speakers to produce texts that are comprehended by listeners. It is the textual function which makes it possible for connecting discourse to the co-text and con-text in which it happens (Fairclough 1995). Fowler notes that 'each of these functions relates to some definite aspects of language structure' (82). Halliday's systemic functional linguistics is utilised for the linguistic analysis. Both CDA and SFL are concerned with the connection between language structure and the social domains. It has interest in the functions of language. CDA emphasizes that language reflects both the social and power structure while SFL examines these structures. The textual analysis involves the examination of the texts that have been chosen. The relationship between a literary text, the language and the culture which is reciprocal and the social actor from who influences flow were examined. The linguistic analysis will account for the meaning of the words, images, thoughts and expressions through a detailed description, giving keen attention to how males and females are portrayed.

## METHOD OF DATA ANALYSIS

Fairclough's (1989, 1995) approach to CDA is adopted for the analysis of the selected text. It proposes three dimensional levels of analysis. These levels of analysis include the text, discourse process and socio-cultural practice. According to Fairclough, language is a discursive event and each of the discursive events has three proportions: (a) it is a written or spoken text, (b) it is an instance of discursive practice involving the production and interpretation of texts and, (c) it is a part of social practice. The analysis of the text consists of the study of the language structures produced in a discursive event (Agbo 91).

### Negative Portrayal of Female Gender in *Things Fall Apart*

The author portrayed women negatively in the book. The negative portrayal of women in the book is discussed under the following subheadings.

#### i. Women as having no identity

In the excerpt below, the young girl who was brought from Mbaino with Ikemefuna has no identity. We are only told that she is 'a young virgin' and that 'the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife'. The name of the lad and age are mentioned but the girl has no name. The feminine gender is treated with disrespect. The essence of not giving women their due and full identity is to undermine their personality and existence. They are usually subordinated to the men as either the wife of 'A' or the daughter of 'B'. No full expression is given to women identity. That is possibly why they take up their husband's identity in marriage.

#### Excerpt 1

... and two days later he returned home with a lad of fifteen and a young virgin. *The lad's name was Ikemefuna...* the *girl* should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered *wife* (P. 10)

#### **Excerpt 2**

*Nwoye's mother* went to him and placed her hands on his chest and his back (P. 22)

Women are captured as those who cannot exist on their own rights. They can only exist if their husbands or sons exist. Their portrayal is such that they derive their identities from men. Nwoye's mother in the above extract has no name. Her son Nwoye is her identity. A woman without a son or husband has no identity, no respect and no place in the society where men dominate, that is, a patriarchal society like the one graphically drawn in the excerpt above.

### **ii. Feminine Gender as Inferior**

#### **Excerpt 3**

*When everyone had drunk two or three horns, Nwakibe sent for his wives.... she went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn ... went back to her hut.* (P. 16)

Women are further portrayed as subservient and second class citizens. They have no right to either express themselves or associate or socialize with men. They are only remembered after men have been taken care of. In the excerpt above, Nwakibe only invited his wives when all the men had drunk two or three horns.

### **iii. Women as Fools**

#### **Excerpt 4**

That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he knew that they were for *foolish women*. (P. 43)

The excerpt above is a comparison between the stories told by men and those told by women, women's stories are for foolish women. This suggests that women are foolish. Okonkwo told Nwoye stories of violence and bloodshed, while his mother told him stories about the quarrel between the heaven and earth. There is neither wisdom nor reason in women stories. This is a negative portrayal of women.

#### **Excerpt 5**

*I had six wives once.* I have none now except that *young girl who knows not her right from her left* (P. 107)

In the excerpt above, Uchendu tells us that he had six wives. This portrays women as commodities to be owned and managed by men. They are inferior and subordinate to men. The excerpt further reveals women as fools. The last wife of Uchendu does not know her left from her right. By implication, she is a fool.

**iv. Feminine Gender as Lazy**

**Excerpt 6**

The world was silent except for the shrill cry of insects, which was part of the night, and *the sound of wooden mortar and pestle as Nwayieke pounded her foofoo*. .. She was *notorious for her late cooking* (P. 76)

‘She was notorious for late cooking’ paints a bad picture of Nwayieke. She is known by all for her late cooking. She is a lazy woman who cares less about time. Perhaps she busies herself around telling foolish stories which women are known for in *Things Fall Apart*.

**v. Women as inherited Property**

**Excerpt 7**

He neither *inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife* (P. 14)

Women are constructed in the above excerpt as property to be inherited by men. They are treated as sub-human or inferior citizens. Okonkwo did not inherit anything from the father. He did not inherit a barn, a title or even a young wife. Women are acquired and inherited as property by men and are treated as such. This kind of subservient construction is pursued in the lines below:

**CONCLUSION**

This is an overt revelation of language as a means of patriarchal exercise of discrimination, disregard for and subjugation of women. It is against this assumption that women are seen as inferior, impure, devilish, stupid, fearful, weak and irresponsible, as represented in a patriarchal society. Such qualities possessed by Achebe’s women are dependence, cowardice, submission and vacillation. Achebe paints a picture of a society where men rule and dominate. He presents a society where there is an unequal power relation with the men as dominant figures and heads. Okonkwo is a wealthy man who has a large barn full of yams. He also owns women as property – he has three wives under his care and control. He provides for the three wives who solely depend on him for their survival. The women are at the receiving ends. The patriarchal paradigm that prevailed in the Igbo society then subjected women to a lower position in socio-political and economic hierarchy of Umuofia. Nwoye and Ikemefuna in excerpt 6 are constructed as courageous and strong. They carried their pots of water gallantly while Obiageli, a weakling, smashes hers and resorts to weeping. This polarization shows women as careless and emotional, weak in strength and character. Uchendu further portrayed the foolishness of women by the negative comment he made about his sixth wife.

All the above point to the fact that women in Igbo society in the pre-colonial times have few rights and are subdued by men. Women humbly accept their position as second class citizens in a masculine world.

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