

TRANSCENDING ROLES OF WOMEN AND PRIVILEGED MOTHERHOOD IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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The women in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* belong to an oppressive and misogynistic society, in which they are depicted as enduring beatings and appear to lack a voice of their own. From the beginning of the novel women are presented as objects of exchange, marrying men for the sake of unification between tribes and cowries for their families.¹ An early example of this objectification is introduced when Ogbuefi Udo's wife is murdered; the men from Umuofia take a girl from the village of Mbaino and decide that "the girl should go to Ogbuefi Udo to replace his murdered wife" (Achebe 9). The girl taken from Mbaino remains nameless, serving only as a replacement for the village. Such components have led Westerners to deem the novel as sexist, and critics like Andrea Powell assert it is a reflection of Achebe's own sexism². Although Achebe represents the oppression of women in the Igbo culture, he also introduces complexities within the women characters in the text, especially Ekwefi and Chielo. I propose looking at the complications behind women's roles in the novel, chiefly analyzing Ekwefi's role as a wife and mother, to reevaluate accusations of Achebe's sexism and push against prominent notions that view the women in the novel as agentless. Additionally, I look to Ekwefi and Ezinma's relationship as mother and daughter, surrounded by Okonkwo's

¹ See Krishnan's article "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature," where she outlines all the different manners writers have used women as objects with exchange value that will assist their nation. This view is also rehearsed by Krishnan in her opposition of male writers and their representation of women's roles.

² Amanda claims that if we follow the logic Achebe used to call out James Conrad a racist for *Heart of Darkness*, then Achebe should be labelled a misogynist for his portrayal of women.

fear of weakness and need to assert his authority (maleness), to highlight the hidden agency behind these two characters. Finding the limited agency in the women characters is not a rejection of the oppression and restriction the women face. Instead, complicating the images of these women and extrapolating their authority in a male-centered society shows the complexity in Achebe's recovery of pre-colonial Nigerian history.

Most criticism that aligns Achebe's novel with his personal sexism follows the reasoning that, like other male writers in formerly colonized countries, he uses misogyny and sexism to push nationalist causes. Madhu Krishnan points out, in "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature," that women's interests have been "historically neglected in favor of the allegedly more pressing need for racial liberation from the former colonizing powers, following a trend seen nearly uniformly across the postcolonial world" (5). Along the same lines, critic Biodun Jeyifo argues that Achebe's goal of national liberation helps "obscure the oppressions and wrongs done to real women" (855). Amanda Powell uses feminist scholar Kristen Holst Petersen to state the same criticism: "women's issues have been swept aside in African literature for the purposes of nationalist causes" (180). These critics, among many others, share the perception that the women behind Achebe's text lacked agency of their own and were only objects used to expand Achebe's nationalist aim to recover Nigeria through the male lens. In their readings of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's masculinization is representative of Igbo culture, and the women's oppression is a misguided effort, in Achebe's part, to uncover the male power in Igbo communities.³

Nevertheless, Achebe recovering Africa through the highly flawed Okonkwo lacks support. Okonkwo's defects are never hidden from the reader, and his actions of violence are never excused or presented as acceptable. Instead they are highlighted as hypocritical. Throughout the novel Okonkwo is presented as a woman beater, an image argued by critics like Rhonda Cobham to be an essential representation for pre-colonial Igbo society. She writes, "not to write about wife beating in a story about a society where it was practiced would be aesthetically inauthentic" (511). Yet, Okonkwo's brutality is not praised by Achebe; rather he points out the hypocrisy by having Okonkwo serve as one of the members in the *egwugwu* in the case of wife beater Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo. The men condemn Uzowulu's actions with the statement, "It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (Achebe 57). Another instance of Okonkwo receiving criticism for the violence against his wives is when he is

³ Bahri pushes against making representations, stating, "representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or "fiction") and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves" (207).

punished by Eneani, the priest for the goddess Ani, for breaking the week of peace and beating his youngest wife, Ojiugo. Although it can be argued that Okonkwo was only punished for breaking the week of peace—and not because of the violence he enacts against Ojiugo—it is no accident that Achebe places Okonkwo’s beating of Ojiugo during this week and makes him part of the *egwugwu*, the group of individuals that condemn such actions. Therefore, Okonkwo’s violence is not an attempt to recreate authenticity of the Igbo culture but to emphasize it in order to criticize the actions of this utterly flawed protagonist and the society that empowers him.

Furthermore, Achebe shows Okonkwo’s violence is not innate, but connected to the fear of becoming a failure, like his father. Barely two paragraphs into the novel, Achebe makes sure to connect Okonkwo’s need to assert himself through violence with the image of his father. Achebe writes, “whenever [Okonkwo] was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father” (4). As Ifeoma Onyemelukwe argues, Okonkwo’s need to refute his father’s failures leads him to become an extremist in his beliefs, rejecting any sort of femininity and treating the women in his life as objects that he must “possess, admire, desire, dominate, despise, reject and possibly destroy at will” (351). Okonkwo’s actions are what Onyemelukwe calls “a device” that forces the women into subjugation as a response to Okonkwo’s fear of “being perceived as weak and not able to control his household” (353). Okonkwo’s fear drives all of his actions and contributes to his ultimate demise. Thus, Okonkwo is not the true subject in which Achebe begins to recover a nationalist Nigeria. Instead Okonkwo’s radical image gives way to Achebe recovering women’s roles and hidden agency. Despite the women being cast aside because of Okonkwo’s violence and misogyny, they become Achebe’s true objective in recovering the subjugated voices in precolonial history.

Many critics, including Krishnan and Powell, reject Achebe’s depiction of the women in *Things Fall Apart* as representative of African culture. Krishnan claims that Achebe does not properly incorporate the more complex women roles found in Nigerian literature, such as the *umuoda* or the “titled women” (8). Krishnan’s opposition to the women in *Things Fall Apart* follow a common thread of commentary about the lack of inclusion of more powerful women characters found in Nigerian Igbo communities. However, critics searching for a woman to represent women’s influence in Achebe’s novel have found a strong source in Priestess Chielo. In her article, “Female Privilege and Power in *Things Fall Apart*,” Ada Uzoamaka Azodo examines how Chielo manages to be an agent of double identity: representing the typical woman—a widower with two children—and simultaneously carrying out authority through her role as a priestess, a power that Azodo labels “symbolic” and “legitimate” (48). Not only does Chielo hold a role of authority in her society, she holds more influence than

Okonkwo. She can walk through his hut without consequences and take away his favorite child, Ezinma, and he is left powerless. When Chielo first shows up to his compound to take Ezinma, Okonkwo “pleads” with her not to take his daughter; the action of pleading for a man such as Okonkwo—who is afraid to show any emotion—is quite surprising and a reflection of how Chielo’s authority supersedes his.

Chielo is not the only woman who furthers Achebe’s recovery of women’s roles with agency in pre-colonial Nigeria. Although not as obvious, Achebe complicates the roles of the other women in Okonkwo’s village.⁴ Though the women, specially Okonkwo’s wives, are often shown in stereotypical feminine duties of cooking and complying with men’s demands, they also hold duties outside of the home.⁵ Achebe describes a general picture of the women working outside the home, writing, “As the rains became heavier the women planted maize, melons, and beans... The women weeded the farm three times at definite periods in the life of the yams, neither early nor late” (Achebe 22). Women gain agency through these prescribed duties because it turns them into essential providers for their family unit, delivering a wide variety of foods. Even in the concept of the yam being the “king of crops” and a symbol of masculinity, women play a role by weeding the farms. The women thoroughly carry out this responsibility and do it “neither early nor late” (Achebe 22). Yet Okonkwo neglects their duty and occupied space in the production of yams—although his yams are the subject in which he measures his wealth in. These women partaking in the development of yams reinforce the idea that the truth behind women’s agency and roles hides behind the image of masculinity. In the end, Okonkwo is the one who rejects women’s input and not Achebe neglecting to include their roles.

Women transcending oppressive spaces are further explored by Ekwefi. Before becoming Okonkwo’s second wife, Ekwefi was married to another man, Anene; but, unwilling to stay in her marriage, she runs away to be with Okonkwo. Ekwefi comes to this decision on her own, without Okonkwo’s knowledge. Nonetheless he does not object to her decision and fully embraces her, consummating the relationship when she shows up at his door (Achebe 65). This

⁴ Krishnan further argues the missing elements of society wives, titled women, and interaction between the different wives (8).

⁵ This reading could also potentially be applied to Okonkwo’s mother. One of the only moments she is described is when Achebe mentions her working the fields to provide for her family. Achebe writes, “His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans, and cassava” (16). She is able to transcend her domesticized space and provide for her children. However, this reading is more complex because she is forced to feed her family on her own due to the lack of accountability Okonkwo’s father held in the home.

scene gives Ekwefi ownership of her future and body, where she has full sovereignty of who she will share them with. It also points to the possibility of Ekwefi leaving Okonkwo if she desired. As critic Ifi Amadiume points out, “Choice is a feminist issue, yet choice is also contextual. We often do not recognize this fact when we are criticizing African traditions” (59). Although she belongs to an oppressive society, Ekwefi has a choice: she can leave her husband for another man. Though being with Okonkwo has consequences, her marriage to him, unlike her marriage to Anene, was not forced upon by her family or community. Moreover, as Amadiume explains, having choices in an oppressive space—whether classified as a positive or negative choice in the traditional conceptual system—“does not mean that women are not oppressed for making certain choices” (60). It is important to recognize that Ekwefi’s choices, even as they subjugated her to a home ruled by masculine brutality, give her limited autonomy over her relationship, a concept that even Western culture had to make long strives to gain. Thus, the decisions she makes must not be overlooked because it takes away from the agency that she does incur throughout the novel.

Ekwefi’s rebellion is further shown when Okonkwo beats her for stripping a few banana leaves off a tree. Critic Ousseynou B. Traoré points out that Okonkwo views his banana tree as “a figure of his manhood” and Ekwefi ripping the banana leaves is symbolic of stripping him of his “male pride or manhood” (59). This scene highlights Okonkwo’s fear of his masculinity, but it further emphasizes Ekwefi’s rebellion. Having the banana tree represent Okonkwo’s masculinity makes Ekwefi the sole person in the household, and arguably in the whole Igbo community, to ever come close to actually stripping Okonkwo of his manhood—though she had only taken a few leaves. In the same scene, Okonkwo decides to take out his gun—another representation of his manhood—to go hunting. Ekwefi, not long after receiving a beating from him, mutters “something about guns that never shot” (Achebe 25). Viewing the gun as a symbol of Okonkwo’s male pride lets Ekwefi attack his masculinity or lack thereof with her comment, which angers Okonkwo so much so that he shoots at her. Though Ekwefi suffers consequences for her actions, these scenes show the presence of choice and Ekwefi’s willingness to cross patriarchal boundaries, even in a home largely ruled by male brutality.

Furthermore, motherhood is a place where women find influence, especially in their marriage. Krishnan points out that symbolic womanhood in prominent Nigerian literature is deeply connected to the women characters’ ability to have children, and “sterility and [the] lack of children become a marker of subhumanization” (3). Childbearing is even more essential in Okonkwo’s household because more children signify the greater wealth of a man, and his obsession with proving that he was nothing like his father, who only had one wife, becomes a driving point in his life (Achebe 13). Yet, Ekwefi—his favorite

wife—only successfully produces one child who makes it to adulthood. Okonkwo's rejects everything that lessens his superiority or wealth; however, his rejection of Ekwefi as a mother and wife never comes. Instead, their relationship is presented as stronger than that of his and his other wives. Ekwefi is the only wife whose backstory is told, her struggle with motherhood becomes a central point in the novel, and she gets to be the only one with the "audacity to bang on his [Okonkwo's] door" when she needs his help (46). Though her role in her society, because of her lack of children, should be a sign of what Krishnan calls "subhumanization," Ekwefi remains the prominent wife in the home.

The acceptance of Ekwefi's childbearing issues can be tied to the choices that childless Igbo women had before colonization. Amadiume explains that women in the Igbo culture who faced infertility often had different options, including:

[the] adoption of a stranger, asking for the children of her brothers and sisters, marrying a young girl and hav[ing] her husband impregnate her, claim[ing] her pregnant maid's baby. The options [also] include[d] the traditional institution of woman and woman marriage that was widely practiced in many societies in Africa, until the Christian church and colonial administrators banned it. (60).

Achebe does not explicitly explore the possibilities women such as Ekwefi had, but he does open the door to their consideration through the other women's relationships with nonbiological children. The first instance Achebe presents of this image of a nonbiological mother caring for other children is when Okonkwo finds his first wife, who remains unnamed, caring for Ojiugo's children by feeding them without instruction from others, even their biological mother. Afterwards Okonkwo's first wife goes on to lie to Okonkwo when he asks if Ojiugo had asked her to feed them before leaving (19). Okonkwo's first wife steps in as a surrogate mother for Ojiugo's children in her absence, although she could have easily neglected to and not assumed the additional responsibilities of taking care of more children. Metaphorically, Okonkwo's first wife also attempts to take care of Ojiugo by covering for her and lying to their husband—though it proves unsuccessful. The space of nonbiological mothers taking care of another's child is further complicated by Chielo's relationship with Ezinma.

Chielo's role as a second mother to Ezinma shows the power her role as a priestess helps her gain in the Igbo community, and how motherhood is a space of privilege. At first, Chielo as a community member—not a priestess—establishes a loving relationship with Ezinma, calling Ezinma her daughter and providing her with treats (Achebe 30). Chielo asserts more privilege as a priestess by going to Okonkwo's compound to retrieve Ezinma for the god Agbala and taking her without the support from either of her parents (Achebe 61). Yet, during this scene Chielo still views Ezinma as her own child, stating "I

shall carry you on my back. A baby on its mother's back does not know that the way is long" (Achebe 61). Although Chielo is tasked with taking Ezinma to Agbala's cave, her instance in playing the role of a mother is solely her own and she uses her role of authority to enter the privileged space of a mother to this child. The relationship between these characters reflect the complexity behind African pre-colonial motherhood because it represents the different roles that women held in this society and how Chielo gets to experience motherhood through a child that does not biologically belong to her.⁶ Despite Chielo having no fertility issues of her own, she still gets to claim a bond with a child that it is not hers. And while Ekwefi objects to Chielo's demands of taking Ezinma to the cave, Chielo—much like the women who took children away from their biological mothers and claimed them as their own—exerts a privilege due to her societal standing as a priestess.

Chielo's authority as a priestess supersedes Okonkwo's, thus the scene of Ekwefi rejecting Chielo's commands and following after her and Ezinma represents the defiance derived through Ekwefi's role as a mother. After Chielo has taken Ezinma, Okonkwo goes back to his hut but Ekwefi rushes after Chielo and her only child. Ekwefi's decision to follow Chielo opposes her core beliefs situated within the community's rules because Chielo is acting on behalf of a god. It becomes evident that Ekwefi struggles with her choice to contradict Agbala's wishes as she contemplates: "'Woman, go home before Agbala does you harm.' But she could not" (Achebe 63). Ekwefi's inner struggle and ultimate decision, which goes against the authority she is supposed to trust and respect, represents the devotion and transcendence of a mother's love and her continuous rebellion. Ekwefi's decision could have led to persecution and exile, as it did for the many individuals that reject the laws and rules of Igbo traditions.⁷ But Ekwefi's love for her child is greater than her cultural beliefs that when Chielo, with Ezinma still on her back, enters Agbala's cave, she swears that "if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world. She would die with her" (Achebe 65). Ekwefi as a mother embodies the highest revolt: defying the authority of a priestess and a god. Her rebellion against Okonkwo does not come close to her defying Chielo and Agbala. Ekwefi's love and fear for her daughter, influenced by her infertility

⁶ For more on the proactive on nonbiological motherhood, see Amadiume's article *Bodies, Choices, Globalizing Neocolonial Enchantments: African Matriarchs and Mammy Water*. She also outlines the gender flexibility of the Igbo system, where it was possible for women to marry other women, or having "male-daughter," which potentially gave women's the belonging of their own children (59).

⁷ This form of rebellion is also present in Nwoye, who leaves his home because he sees the missionaries as providing a new way of life that does not follow the absurd laws that his traditions and community follows—the very same laws that resulted in Ikemefua's death.

issues, allow her to transcend cultural expectations, even those rooted in the highest regard of religious authority.

Moreover, Ekwefi and Ezinma's connection as mother and daughter surpass other relationships presented in the novel, representing a relationship of equals. The novel is invested in representing the dichotomy of men versus women and the different levels of power between characters—for example, Okonkwo versus Chielo or Ekwefi versus the other wives—that a relationship between equals is almost non-existent, except for Ekwefi and Ezinma's relationship. When Achebe introduces how Ekwefi and Ezinma function around each other, he remarks that Ezinma did not call her mother the traditional word for mother, Nne, instead she called her by her name (Achebe 47). This was not a sign of disrespect against Ekwefi, but rather a sign of equality. Achebe writes, "The relationship between them was not only that of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals" (Achebe 47).⁸ Ekwefi and Ezinma do not follow the social script of mother and daughter like all of the other wives and Okonkwo himself. While Ekwefi does command Ezinma in her assigned duties, like serving food to her father, Ekwefi does not view Ezinma with the lack of respect that Nwoye is shown by Okonkwo. To Ekwefi, Ezinma is another equal-standing individual that enriches her life and companionship. Ekwefi transcends their cultural and domestic oppression by affording Ezinma the privileges reserved for adults. Ezinma, on the other hand, views her mother as her primary protector. She looks to Ekwefi when she seeks comfort from perceived threats, this is both present when Ezinma is questioned by the medicine man and when Chielo comes to take her to Agbala's cave. The other women in Okonkwo's home illustrate the way society dictates the treatment of children and how they must be submissive to their parent's will and obey them. This is also presented in Nwoye and Okonkwo's relationship, where Okonkwo attempts to make Nwoye a hard worker and follow his footsteps. Nevertheless, their relationship strays away from the traditional dynamic between father and son because Nwoye refuses to carry his father's name and responsibilities, and instead joins forces that aid in Okonkwo's destruction. In return, after all the lost Ekwefi endures through the deaths of her children, Ezinma only brings fulfillment to her mother's life by being the only one to survive into adulthood.

Ezinma's relationship with her mother is not the only one shown in a positive manner compared to the other child-adult relationships in the household. Okonkwo's favoritism towards her character and assertive attitude, which he considers to be a masculine trait, foregrounds their relationship as father and

⁸ Okonkwo gets rid of his mother and his agbala (female) father psychologically, which is a deep form of murder (60) Motherhood and womanhood are only a problem to the pathological sexist that Okonkwo is (67)

daughter. Okonkwo's obsession with traditions about masculinity marks his preference for Ezinma as peculiar. In *Things Fall Apart*, and certainly traditional patriarchal communities, sons are favored over daughters because they hold the most obvious form of power in this society: they are the ones that get to pass down a legacy—the main reason why Okonkwo becomes severely disappointed in Nwoye's failure to replicate his toxic masculinity. Additionally, sons are the ones whose duty it is to control their household and use excessive force to get what they want, a tactic employed immensely by Okonkwo. Therefore, Ezinma's expression of an assertive and masculine tone should have angered her father because it helps her to break from the societal script that women should not hold these attitudes and rather be submissive to the men in the household. Instead, Okonkwo values her forceful behavior, wishing that she had been born a boy (Achebe 59). Blessing Diala-Ogamba argues, in "Children of the Home", that "Okonkwo realizes that Ezinma's boldness as it were, will benefit her in raising her children and in her relationship with her future husband, and accommodates this characteristic as a positive trait" (60). However, painting Ezinma as the model of masculinity that Nwoye should have reached to please their father illustrates that her assertiveness and boldness—markers of masculinity to Okonkwo—are tools of privilege reserved for men that must control their household. As a future wife and mother, Ezinma should not have these tools or assert such attitudes. Yet it is through the help of Okonkwo that she pushes the boundaries imposed upon her by both himself and the community that demands women's obedience and silence.⁹

Ekwefi and Ezinma prove to be the women with the most agency in Okonkwo's household. Ekwefi can rebel against her husband, insult his manhood, and neglect a priestess authority while Ezinma has the freedoms to undertake a behavior reserved for men. Both of these characters transcend their roles in both their Igbo culture and the tyrannical space of Okonkwo's home. Yet, they achieve their potential through the evident favoritism Okonkwo affords the pair. Curiously, Okonkwo has enough wives and children to choose any favorites he so wishes. Most importantly he has sons and wives that bore him those sons, the

⁹ Ezinma's assertiveness is also shown when she is set to get married. When Okonkwo has been arrested, she breaks her visit of twenty-eight days to her future husband's family, returning home "when she heard that her father had been imprisoned, and was going to be hanged" (Achebe 111). She breaks the customary roles designed for women, because of her connection to her father, the same man that helps her develop her "masculine" assertiveness.

gender which he—and his society—so greatly favors. His other wives also successfully bear him more healthy children than Ekwefi does, helping him achieve his dream of wealth and prosperity (at least at the beginning). Ekwefi's and Ezinma's mere existences work against Okonkwo's vision of wealth and masculinity with Ekwefi constantly undermining his manhood and Ezinma being the only child from Ekwefi that survives. Therefore, Okonkwo's favoritism shows how even this misogynist and cruel protagonist, who appears to be set on his traditional beliefs, assists in the development and discovery of women's hidden agency in precolonial Nigeria.

Finally, Okonkwo's mother, who is perhaps the most oppressed woman in the novel, helps the discovery of further subjected voices in Igbo culture and illustrates how Okonkwo's demise could have been prevented had he listened to his mother's tales. Okonkwo's mother, who never receives a name, holds no authority or larger role in her community, and is further oppressed by her husband's laziness that forces her to work on her own to provide for her whole family (Achebe 16). However, there is a small glimpse into her greater role within the subject of women's storytelling—something that Okonkwo rejects with force, preferring the “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed” (Achebe 33). The Snake-Lizard story, which Traoré ties with the “narrative legacy of Okonkwo's mother,” represents another form of women-led authority that interconnects Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Okonkwo's mother (55). The Snake-Lizard story, told by Ekwefi and Ezinma, is about decentered motherhood and the consequences of such neglect. The story begins:

“[The snake-lizard] gave his mother seven baskets of vegetables to cook and in the end there were only three. And so he killed her,” said Ezinma.

“That is not the end of the story.”

“Oho,” said Enzima. “I remember now. He brought another seven baskets and cooked them himself. And there were again only three. So he killed himself too.” (Achebe 51).

The stories are valuable to their community for their morals, and they represent women's authority because they are the ones in charge of recounting them. This story is especially valuable to Okonkwo because of its message on motherhood, but he never hears it due to his abhorrence of such tales and rejection of women's “expressive culture” (Traoré 55). Traoré states that “The women's tale of decentered motherhood is indeed metaphorically intended for Okonkwo who is not there to hear the mother's wisdom that might have saved his life at the end of the novel.” (55). The story ties back to Okonkwo's repression of the memories about his own mother and her stories; it also reflects his overall perception of motherhood. When he arrives at his mother's village, after his exile, he is not able to understand why “mother is supreme” or the importance of

motherhood. Uchendu—his mother’s brother—tries to explain how mother is supreme, establishing how mothers provide comfort from the violence of fathers and that “when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme” (Achebe 78). Had Okonkwo not rejected this womanly authority and had listened to the tale, along with his uncle’s insight, his ending might have been different. But his insistence on rejecting femininity and the importance of women in his culture stops him from ever learning the fatal consequences of decentered motherhood. Ultimately, his misguided views and stubbornness regarding his perception of women lead to his untimely death, like the Snake-Lizard’s.

Okonkwo’s demise is closely tied to the Anglo-colonization and his death is symbolic of the loss of his Igbo precolonial culture. In an interview with Rose Mezu, Achebe states that women’s subjugation and men’s state of being power hungry resulted in “Okonkwo [paying] a terrible price by being banished for ever in the evil forest, and so did the Igbo society by suffering defeat at the hands of alien civilization” (29). This insight into Achebe’s decision to kill his protagonist shows how Achebe is invested in representing Igbo women’s importance to precolonial history, but it is the misogynist, patriarchal, and tyrannical men like Okonkwo, who relegated these voices to the background. For in doing so, they suffered a cultural and a physical suicide.

Nevertheless, the role women play in *Things Fall Apart* has been constantly undermined by critics, especially Ekwefi’s role. Cobham summarizes Ekwefi and Okonkwo’s marriage as having “all the passion, violence, and shared trauma we associate with the Western romantic tradition” (517). Cobham’s reading manages to take away agency from Ekwefi’s choices by claiming it as a stylistic choice on Achebe’s part to reach his Western audience. It rejects Ekwefi’s gained autonomy when she leaves her first husband for Okonkwo, and it discards her constant rebellion against him. Instead of allowing these elements to be part Achebe’s complexity in recovering pre-colonial Nigeria, Cobham rejects them by enforcing that they are Western beliefs that Achebe’s Western audience wanted to see—a perception that Krishnan further critiques, claiming that Achebe disregards women’s roles in Igbo society to create a binary world that could be “easily digested by a Western audience” (8). These perceptions of Achebe reaching Western audiences through the minimalization of Igbo women and the employment of Western traditions only damage the ways women in the novel gain agency and combat their oppression. If these elements are attributed to Western culture, the women end up with even less of a voice. However, if the women, especially Ekwefi, are allowed to make a space for themselves—as Amadiume argues when saying “women in traditional society in Nnobi, other Igbo societies, and African societies in general made and had space for themselves and were therefore involved in cultural production” (44)—then they

become pivotal in Achebe's intention, not to please his Western audience, but to discover the subtle spaces of agency for women in pre-colonial Nigeria.

Furthermore, women's oppression has been used to justify Anglo-colonization, and Westerners' perceptions of Igbo women in Achebe's work as agentless colonize the perceptions of women's roles, depriving them of any agency they achieve. Deepika Bahri observes that "the status of native women was used to justify the colonial project as a civilizing mission" (200). Similarly, the women in Achebe's world and the insistence that he only uses them as part of his nationalist aim—or to reach Western audiences—and does not properly explore their roles, paints the women as in need of this colonizing and civilizing mission. However, they are only so if they are viewed as agentless and voiceless. If their roles as wives, community members with authority roles like Chielo's, and most importantly mothers, are given the attention and commendation they deserve, then the women become subjects with missions and voices of their own, oppressed by universal ideas of patriarchy, not just ideas belonging to the Igbo community.

Ultimately, Achebe does not romanticize the precolonial past and is brutal in his retelling, never hiding the atrocious actions of wife beaters, the killings of youths, or the abandonment of infant twins. Yet Okonkwo, with all of his faults, keeps drawing in critics who argue that this failed protagonist is Achebe's attempt at recovering pre-colonial history. Yet, Okonkwo's assigned masculine fragility and damaged traits that lead him to his ultimate demise face constant indirect criticism from Achebe. It is the women in the novel—Ekwefi, Chielo, Ezinma, Okonkwo's mother, and even those whose names are never told, only their actions described—who exhibit gainful qualities deserving of appreciation and reminiscence. However, the constant rejection and lack of exploration of their voices only paint them as agentless figures, colonized once again by Western voices and ideas. But if they are allowed the spaces of limited agency they inhabit, then they develop into the positive in Achebe's recovery of Nigeria's pre-colonial history and the ones whose stories should be further explored.

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