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## Beyond the Margins: Re-evaluating the Representation of Women in Chinua Achebe's Fiction

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### Abstract

Chinua Achebe's fiction, in its ever so popular work as a rebuilder of African identity and history, has faced criticism over the way it has silenced women's voices under the patriarchal Igbo society. Yet a more careful reading shows us that even the women in Achebe's villages are anything but banal: they exude quiet strength, resilience and moral authority. Abstract This article revisits Achebe's presentation of women in *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease* to reveal levels of agency frequently overlooked by conventional criticism. Within the framework of post-colonial feminist theory, this study posits that Achebe's women are only victims of patriarchy, but also active agents in maintaining the continuity of culture and stability of society. Through figures such as Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Akueke, Achebe interrogates one-dimensional notions of African womanhood and points to a complex view of gender in Igboland. The paper argues that Achebe's portrayal of women is underpinned by patriarchal borderlines, but at the same time humanises and dignifies them, encouraging readers to consider the "beyond the margins" of narrative visibility.

**Keywords:** Women character, Tradition, Culture, Power, Post-Colonialism, Africa, Igbo, Men Power, God, Gender, Love

### Introduction:

African literature, in contrast to literary traditions elsewhere, holds a distinctive identity. Writers in this field often seek to challenge the colonial perspective that depicted Africans as uncivilised and lacking a structured culture. British colonisers reinforced such portrayals, but literary figures such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka reshaped global perceptions. Through their works, they emphasised Africa's rich natural resources, deep-rooted traditions, and cultural heritage, countering the misconceptions

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perpetuated by colonial narratives. Achebe's novels deal primarily with one group of people in one part of Africa from precolonial days to the present.

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) was a renowned Nigerian novelist, poet, professor, and critic. He is best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*, which is widely regarded as one of the most influential African novels of the 20th century. Growing up in the Igbo town of Ogidi, Achebe spoke Igbo at home and studied English in school. He absorbed the dual culture in his early life. In an autobiographical essay, he describes his childhood as being “at the crossroads of cultures.” Achebe's writing is always exploring colonialism and its impact, many books were related to these topics only, and he explained the Igbo culture which was traditionally followed by the people in Kenya and also about the society. His works are based on the struggles and portrayals of African cultures, histories, and experiences. The cultural identity and the representations are involved in his writings. The storytelling of Achebe was a very interesting part, and readers are melting with his words and techniques used by him with modern literary forms, creating a unique narrative voice. And here in this paper we are going to see how women characters are involved and portrayed by the author in different ways in the novels. *Things Fall Apart*, a classic novel about the life of Okonkwo, a Nigerian farmer, and the changes brought by British colonialism. *No Longer at Ease*, a novel exploring the tensions between traditional culture and modernity in post-colonial Nigeria. *Arrow of God*, a novel set in the early 20th century, examining the impact of colonialism on traditional Igbo society.

### **Beyond the Margins:**

*Things Fall Apart* is a novel by Chinua Achebe that explores the difficulties of traditional Igbo culture and the impact of British colonialism. The story revolves around the main character Okonkwo, a strong and powerful Igbo farmer, whose life is interrupted by the arrival of European colonizers. As the novel grows, Achebe masterfully weaves together themes of identity, culture, and the consequences of change, ultimately leading to the tragic confrontation between tradition and modernity. The women characters in the novel are Ekwefi (Okonkwo's second wife), Ojiugo's daughter, and the mother of the osu. The women are often depicted as caregivers and nurturers, playing crucial roles in the family and community life, which shows the motherhood and nurturing of women characters in the novel. The strength of women in the novel is well explained by the author; despite facing various challenges and hardships, they are the backbone of the family—without them, there will be no peace. Women in the novel demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. Moreover, in the Igbo society, women depend on their husband or else any male relative in their family. Domination takes place in olden days; the words of women are not valued by men. It shows the limited agency of women in the family as well as in Igbo society.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe depicts the collapse of tribal culture under the pressure of colonization through trade, religion, superior weaponry, and administration. The novel describes the destruction of an ancient civilization and social anarchy. The novel is not written in Igbo language. As observed in the book of Pandurang Mala (2006:53), women play a significant role in the novels of Achebe: “When the elders said that the sun will shine on those

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who stand before it shines on those who sit in the shade, they meant that hard work will bring rewards” (Achebe, 1958, p. 22).

Women characters in this novel are shown secondary in a male-dominated society. The reasonable domain of activity for women is the household, which includes the kitchen and the cradle. In Igbo society, women play a major role in following and keeping the tradition and culture in a good way and passing them to the future generation, and participate in farming, trade, and other economic activities, contributing to the community’s well-being. And the novel portrays instances of domestic violence, highlighting the vulnerability of women in their own homes. Even though the women have limited access to power and decision-making, relegating them to secondary roles. Ekwefi’s character, in particular, showcases a strong and independent woman who navigates the complexities of Igbo society. The Oracle, Chielo, wields significant spiritual power and influence, demonstrating the importance of women’s roles in Igbo spirituality.

*No Longer at Ease* is the novel exploring the complexities of identity, culture, and modernity in the post-colonial period in Nigeria. The story follows Obi Okonkwo, a young Igbo man who returns to his homeland Nigeria after studying abroad, as he navigates the challenges of traditional expectations, personal ambition, and the corrupting influence of power. Achebe writes about Obi’s experiences in Lagos to reproduce the challenges facing a new generation on the verge of Nigerian independence. Obi is trapped between the expectations of his family, clan, and larger society. He is crushed by these forces and finds himself imprisoned for bribery. The author explains the critiques of the corrupting influence of power and the multiple cultural identities and expectations in the Igbo society. They give more attention to culture and tradition; people are not forced to do it, but they love to do the traditional things as their hometown gifted to them. They believe in God as well as follow all olden things, which will give them well-being and good health for themselves and their future generation. Also, Achebe’s writing clarifies to us all their intention to follow culture and tradition. “Whenever you see an idiot, you should ask yourself: what is his mother doing?” (Achebe, 1964, p. 33). Achebe’s portrayal of women in the novel is complex and nuanced. Women contributed to the novel highlights the challenges faced by women in a rapidly changing society.

Clara Okeke, a beautiful and educated young woman who becomes the main character in women’s role as Obi’s love interest. And she is a Christian girl, and she helped Obi in many ways; she stood with him in all struggles, and Obi stands with her. And she was shown as a symbol of modernity and cultural identity in the novel. Moreover, in older days men were only educated, and women were rare and unlucky in getting educated. Obi’s mother is another main woman character who follows the traditions of Igbo and is a woman who values cultural heritage and family expectations. Elsie, a young woman who becomes pregnant out of wedlock, highlighting her as a cultural blackhead, and she faces many struggles and the societal pressures and expectations placed on women.

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Clara is a significant character who shows people the real trust of education and challenges traditional expectations of women in Igbo society, and she is very different from the women who were born and brought up from the tradition of Igbo. Her heritage and exposure to western culture create tension and conflict in her relationships with the family members and village peoples, and she faces various constraints and expectations. “Take two before you go to bed, I’ve got enough for all the passengers” and “Good night, you’ll feel better in the morning” (N.L.E. p. 28). In the above words, it shows the gentleness in a woman’s language and the love and care of Clara towards Obi.

The impact of colonialism on women in Igbo society: they bear the brunt of cultural disruption and change, which shows women have to change according to the situation happening around them and adopt the culture that was followed by their family men or their husband. Here in the novel, women are shown as cultural carriers and helpful to family and a person to follow all footsteps of men; though it is colonial rule or post-colonial rule, women are meant to be the major role of men’s life. Achebe uses some cultural activity to project certain native values towards achieving self-representation. He shows the richness and warmth of how Africans relate to one another in a manner that brings out the reality of traditional socialism.

*Arrow of God*, a novel by Chinua Achebe, was published in 1964. The story of the novel relates to a Nigerian village called Umuaro and revolves around the life of Ezeulu, the chief priest of the god Ulu. In the 1920s, as in other novels of the author, he explained the theme of culture, tradition, colonialism, and personal identity as Ezeulu navigates the challenges in his role in the novel and the impact of British colonialism on his community. In the Igbo community, people trust Ulu, so the novel is named *Arrow of God*. It represents the power and authority of Ulu, and the traditional Igbo culture and values. And the main thing in the novel is the arrow that represents the violence that arises from the clash between the British colonial power and traditional Igbo culture.

The female characters contributed to the richness and depth of the novel. The novel portrays the important roles that women play in Igbo society; their roles are differently shown as caregivers, mothers, and spiritual leaders. It highlights the experiences and perspectives of women in Igbo society during the colonial era. The female characters, on the contrary, are tender and affectionate and also have low tone. “A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing” (Achebe, 1964, p. 33).

In this novel the author explains the struggle faced by Igbo women and also how they were affected by colonialism, and they faced it with all courage. Ugoye, one of Ezeulu’s wives and the most significant figure in the novel, is portrayed as a strong and wise woman in the novel. She provides guidance and support to her husband Ezeulu; the loyalty and support of Ugoye gives her husband moral strength to face the British colonialism as they extend control over the Igbo people, imposing their own values, laws, and institutions. Here the author shows the power of women in playing major roles; through her interactions with Ezeulu, Ugoye reveals his strength and weaknesses. Matefi is a young woman in the village; her character also

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symbolises the changing times and the tensions between traditional and modern values. The female characters in the novel demonstrate agency and resilience and contribute to their communities.

The selected texts in this study primarily depict the Kenyan women's struggle for social progress through a realist literary lens. Simultaneously, Achebe's profound appreciation for native traditions and cultural heritage is thoroughly examined. His works emphasize the importance of democratic values, individual rights, and political engagement while illustrating the profound disruptions colonialism imposed on the daily lives of Kenyans, both collectively and individually. In African philosophy, decolonization represents an ideology advocating for complete liberation from all cultural, economic, political, and psychological remnants of colonialism.

In *Things Fall Apart*, words and concepts such as *chi*, *egwugwu*, *ogbanje*, and *obi* are essentially untranslatable, but by using them in the context of his story, Achebe supports the non-Igbo reader to consider and relate to this colonial Igbo culture. Post-colonial literature gives importance to the need to hold native cultural identity by posing an impediment to the colonial influence. Achebe, an exemplary post-colonial writer, wants to convince his people about their lost glory through his presentation of the issue of identity crisis experienced by his immortal protagonists in his novels. He wants the people to realize what happened to them as an outcome of colonialism by citing examples of his characters in the novels. A study of his novels thus reveals that the heroes of his stories strive hard to resist the new system and to maintain their own identity. Achebe's novels thus delineate the steady erosion and overwhelming of Igbo culture.

### Conclusion

In the end, Achebe's masterful storytelling weaves a rich tapestry of culture, identity, and human experience. He speaks more about the British colonial impact on the people of Igbo society and the struggles faced by them. Women characters play a major role in each man's life. His novels not only reflect the past but also illuminate the present. Post-colonial Kenyan writers have utilised fiction as a potent instrument of resistance against both colonial and post-colonial oppression, as well as imperialism. They contend that colonialism not only dismantled Africa's and Kenya's cultural identity but also deprived them of their independence, thereby diminishing the autonomy of those subjected to white imperialist rule. Generally, the significant energy in post-colonial writings is challenging the misconstructions raised by colonizers and how to eradicate those from the cultural and historical aspects. Also, these writers had to bring back the true Kenya before the arrival of colonizers. His vision extends beyond literature; it is a call to action for political, economic, and social emancipation. Through a critical engagement with his writings, we come to understand that decolonization is not merely a theoretical discourse but an ongoing struggle—one that requires collective effort to restore Kenya's identity, self-determination, and women's struggle. In all places there is some importance of women shown, particularly in the way he praised the women who are behind every man's character in the novel. It shows the thought of Achebe's love for women's power

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and knowledge which was used by men in achieving success in their life even though women are not allowed to raise their voice and tell their opinion in the crowd and respected people of the Igbo society. Women are heard by some men and succeed in their life, and this is noted by Achebe.

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