COUNTERING MASCULINITY: CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND THE RISE OF FEMINIST ASSERTIVENESS IN THE NOVELS OF NIGERIAN FEMALE WRITERS

Niyi AKINGBE[1] & Christopher Babatunde OGUNYEMI[2]

Abstract

It would not be overstating of the fact to say that Chinua Achebe is aforemost African writer, whose influence has been felt in the African cultural affirmation. This is most obvious in*Things Fall Apart*,a novel crafted to challenge the European conventional assumption that Africa has no culture. However, where Achebe privileges Okonkwo as a paradigm of African communal standard bearer, the third generation Nigerian female writers discredit the masculine violence derived from the Okonkwo's tempestuous trajectory. The paper examinesthe Nigerian female writers' countering of masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in order to imbue in their female characters a measure of assertiveness needed for a robust African communal development. The paper will further illustrate how Nigerian female writers like Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Lola Shoneyin, Chika Unigwe and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have depicted various assertive roles accorded their female characters in the plots of their novels. The paper significantly relies on Judith Butler's theory of performativity which explains the difference between biological disposition and cultural motivation of gender for the development of women in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, countering masculinity, assertiveness, patriarchy, Nigerian female writers, *Things Fall Apart*.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's portrayal of women in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is overt with multiple explanations. To start with, Achebe is a first generation Nigerian post-colonial writer who often show cases African culture that some what reflects patriarchy in most of his novels. To examine portrayal of the image of women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it is expedient to re-examine the overbearing disposition of Okonkwo as if affects some women characters asexemplified in the plot of the novel. Also, the paper will focus on the assertive roles wielded by the female characters in*Things Fall Apart* in relation to the overarching articulation of some other female characters embedded in the novels of the first and third generations of Nigerian female writers. Obviously, these female characters are emboldened for the purpose of deconstructing the overbearing masculinity foregrounded in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Remarkable to note that, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* must be seen as a two-fold reactions: against the demeaning British colonial portrayal of Africans as weaklings surreptitiously depicted in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and; the overt denial and the denigration of African culture in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2008). In Cary's novel, there is a deliberate creation of effeminate image of an African, obviously a Nigerianwho works in London as a clerk during the colonial

[1] Associate Professor of Comparative Literature in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria
[2] Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature, Department of English, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

period. Johnson, as the name depicts, is a mimicry of a man crippled by an inferiority complexthat is ostensibly orchestrated by the British racial stereotyping. Similarly, Conrad creates a contrary image of Africa "with its impenetrable forests, throbbing drums, and primitive customs…" (Carroll, 15). Achebe's reaction to this racial subversion in the *Things Fall Apart* manifestly resonates in the overt creation of the larger than life Okonkwo with an acquisitive territorial inclination. This character formation is meant to fiercely affirm the masculinity of African men bristling with energy, determination and tenacity required to build an enduring community. However, African women writers have often misread Okonkwo's imbued traits as a privileging of masculinity to the disadvantage of the womanhood. For instance, *Things Fall Apart* starts with Okonkwo's perception of his father Unoka as lazy and woman-like (*efulefu*) who abhors the sight of blood that is often associated with tribal warfare, but only enjoys playing flute and drinking of palm-wine ceaselessly.

By juxtaposing between Unoka and Okonkwo personalities, Achebe succeeded in creating a shift in the relationship between obsessive hardwork and frustrating complacency. However, Okonkwo's morbid fascination with the pursuit of success has been sarcastically described in the words of David Carroll who argued that, Okonkwo "must succeed in everything his father failed at and so wipe out his memory…"(44). Nevertheless, in an attempt at re-conceptualizing masculinity, Okonkwo over-tasked his ambition which is often perceived as a feat which culminated in some communal dislocations traced to him. According to Achebe, Okonkwo's life "was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness…it was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (*Things Fall Apart*, 12-13). Hence, Okonkwo's restless crave for prominence disastrously led to the beaten of his wife Ojuigo during the Week of peace and the killing of Ikemefuna, an act that finally brought a monumental destruction on him.Although, Okonkwo's overt pursuit of bravery succeeded initially, but when all is said and done the pursuit created a false contradiction between strength and gentleness; callousness and empathy (Carroll, 45). Consequently, Achebe's fetishization of Okonkwo's unbridled pursuit of fame and valour at the expense of considered humanity has been frowned upon by the third generation Nigerian female writers as a retrograde step. Leading second generation Nigerian female writers like Karen King-Aribisala, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali alongside some third generation female writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe and Lola Shoneyin to mention a few, are of the conviction that the trajectory of postcolonial Africa's development can only be meaningfully pursued when there is a mutual collaboration between men and women.

A rejoinder from these female writers canonly be understood from the perspective of Judith Butler's 'gender performance theory'. It is a theory which underscores social relevance of woman in the art of development as it affects the contemporary Nigerian and African societies. Therefore, Butler's theory of performativity further explains the literary framework this paper relies upon for the delineation of women assertiveness in

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

the post-*Things Fall Apart* novels of the Nigerian female writers. An application of 'gender performance theory' to narrative as well as poetic work allows for an analysis of the relationship which exists between male/female characters; their social functions, and the actualisation of the concept of self-narrative in post-colonial Nigeria. In addition, most Nigerian novelists have utilized their narratives to explore the place of feminism, identity and gender in Africa. Examples abound in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966); John Munonye's *Oilman of Obange* (1971); Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the strong Ones* (1996); Karen King-Aribisala's *Kicking Tongues* (1998) and most prominently in, Chinua Achebe's creation of the classical character-Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart.* Achebe invested in Okonkwo in the novel with excessive power over every event and activity in Umuofian community.

To shed more light on this, the plot of the novel revolves around Okonkwo, the male protagonist, from the beginning to the end of the novel. In Christopher Ogunyemi's essay 'Wisdom and Age', he states that most Nigerian critics applaud the fame and prosperity of Okonkwo as represented through a perceived psychological stream of consciousness. Ogunyemi illustrates further that, "we examine the novel textually by pinpointing some elements of wisdom that were demonstrated by Okonkwo" (125). This point affirms that Achebe not only gave a strong masculinist depiction of Okonkwo, but set its signification ultimately. The third generation Nigerian female writers opposing Achebe's position were effectively faced with the choice of re-constructing Nigerian/African society by portraying the negative subscription to masculinity as inimical to the modern African social setting. They contend that male domination of African social space would ultimately strain a mutual relationship between men and women; and in turn jeopardise the tasking demandfor assiduous contributions of the duoto the societal growth.

Shifting to the women characters and their roles in *Things Fall Apart,* we see that Ekwefi, Ezinma and Ojuigo are very prominent in the novel. The former are major female characters while the latter is a minor female character to whom Achebe nonetheless assigns a significant role as well. Although Ekwefi is Okonkwo's second wife, she is brave, independent, persistent and strong in resisting some social stigmatization leveled against her in the course of her motherhood. She exhibits a profound knowledge of Umuofian society by showing a great love for the tradition, loves her only child while the other children in the house also receive significant attention from her. Although, she lost many children in their infancy, but has a surviving daughter Ezinma who is an'ogbanje' but precociously bright.

Due to her incessantly giving birth to *ogbanje* children, Ekwefi is perceived to have been cursed and her '*chi*' is assumed to have been destined to suffer continual loss often expressed in her incessant bearing of Ogbanje children. This interpretation derived from the mythical signification of *chi* enshrined in the Igbo communal milieu. The concept of 'chi' has been further explicated in the words of Carroll "the Umofians believe that each person possesses a *chi* or personal god which plays an important role in his/her destiny-

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

but not to the exclusion of all other factors…"(43). In order to appreciate the importance of *chi*, Achebe remarkably stresses in the novel that Ekwefi is already a bitter and unhappy woman before giving birth to a child named Onwubiko who later died, mutilated and thrown into the evil forest like other 'Ogbanjes' in Umofia. Most of Ekwefi's precious time and attention is devoted to the upkeep of her only surviving child, Ezinma in order to derive a motherhood gratification. Similarly, Chielo is the Priestess of Agbala who accompanies Ezinma to the evil forest to complete the necessary sacrifices that would enable her live the normal birth-death cycle. She is a peculiar girl-child who manifests great magical powers that often make her desires to live and sometimes to die as well. As the only surviving child of Ekwefi, she is also the closest to Okonkwo among the children. Although Ezinma is an 'Ogbanje', her introspective curiosity has undoubtedly created a very special bond between her and Okonkwo who often regrets she was not a boy. Inspite of her been constantly flogged by her husband, Ojuigo is the youngest wife of Okonkwo who demonstrates a good understanding of Okonkwo's household. Curiously, Ekwefi and Ezinma share intimate feelings and the latter always calls her mother by the first name to justify her independence, freedom and strength. Achebe's Umofia is a poignant reflection of theAfrican society within the period between 1850 and 1900.It is a depiction of a society that relies greatly on physical strength, in which the likes of Nwakibie could marry nine wives, sire thirty children and own plenty of yam barns with the highest titles any man could boast of in Umofia (*Things Fall Apart*, p.27).

Deconstructing Masculinity in the novels of Nigerian female writers

The role of women in *Things Fall Apart*goes beyond child raising. It is evident in the novel that Ekwefi, Ezimma, Chielo, Ojuigo and even some of the nine wives of Nwakibie enjoy some economic independence concomitant of the traditional Igbo society. As such the relationship between a man and his wife is complimentary to the extent that while men grow yam, the women grow cocoyam and cassava.As mothers and wives, they displayed deep knowledge of the Igbo customs which emphasize that they are supportive of their hardworking spouses. This support is often rendered in the provision of cooking pots, wooden bowls, brooms, mortar, pestle, baskets, mats, ladles, pots of palm oil, cocoyam, smoked fish, locust beans, heads of salt and pepper especially during the marriage ceremony (Carroll, 24).Nevertheless, in Igbo land a man is expected to work hard and make adequate provision of food and shelter for his family. This mandatory task has been alluded to by David Carroll when he enthuses thatin the traditional Igbo setting "each compound consists of the houses of a man, his wives, and some of his sons; it is surrounded by a mud wall which separates it from its neighbours. Inside, each wife has her own room where she lives with her small children and unmarried daughters, and her storeroom and kitchen… (26). Inability of a man to make adequate provision of the aforementioned facilities renders him effeminate or '*efulefu*'. Consequently, when Ekwefi's first husband was too poor and powerless to pay her bride price, she left him and married Okonkwo. Also, when Uzowulu constantly beats his wife, she ran away to her father's

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

house until the matter was settled amicably by the body of *Egwugwu*. Contrary to a popular notion that women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are forever subservient to the whims and caprices of their husbands, some assertive actions have been acknowledged to have been taken by Ekwefi and Chielo, the Agbala priestess in the novel. Although, actions are often taken either directly or indirectly by assertive women in the novel to foreground the fact that women are able to take decisions at a critical period when a situation for such arises. Similarly, Mama in *Purple Hibiscus* did so indirectly when she dealt Mr. Eugene a deadly blow by gradually poisoning his food. In *The Joys of Motherhood,* Nnu Ego did the same when she decides to stay with Nnaife who can give her children and make her a complete woman despite the fact that Nnaife is not her dream man. These decisions taken directly or indirectly in these novels, affirm the assertiveness of women in an attempt at subverting the depressing masculine bravado displayed by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart.*

Also, due to the assertiveness of Buchi Emecheta's Nnu Ego, Chimamanda Adichie's Mama and Aunty Ifeoma, together with Achebe's Ekwefi; these womenhave been continually valorized by the post-colonial African women writers as characters who have contributed to the overarching social transformation urgently needed for the re-construction of African social space. These female characters have demonstrated in the observation of Judith Butler that gender is culturally motivated and it is not a biological inhibition of women (Butler, 1990: 10). Put differently, what Butler means is that definition of gender must be devoid of biological classification of concept for 'social and behavioral relevance' (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990: 2). The implication of this statement is axiomatic, Butler implies that gender must not be based on the criteria of male or female in any society but by the dictation of societal relevance and behavioral motivation of the differing individuals. Consequently, Nnu Ego, Ekwefi, Mama, Aunty Ifeoma, Ezimma, Chielo and other female characters have used their cultural dispositions to enhance performativity in their different trajectories without relying on their husbands, fathers or any male figure in their individual spaces.

However, to critically question the aforementioned works from a womanist perspective, and to attempt a clearer understanding of the motif of gender and women's development in Nigeria, the work of Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's *Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English* (1985) would be a reference point. Here, she probes into the concept of 'womanism' and its attendant interpretations. Okonjo-Ogunyemi illustrates that the womanist vision attempts to respond to the final question of how power is shared among people of diverse races and people of diverse sexes in all societies. She moves away from Alice Walker's parochial womanist definition often considered to be symptomatic of racist inclination. Okonjo-Ogunyemi's 'Womanism' posits a more independent definition which incorporates African women and their all- encompassing philosophy of tolerance that alsoaccommodates their male counterparts. In the long run, she observes that on many occasions, some Black/African writers attempt to write and follow their own independent minds by chosen to be called

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

womanist which is in contrast to white women writers who see themselves as feminists (*The Dynamics*, p.64).

Similarly, Okonjo-Ogunyemi observes that Alice Walker's feminism is purely western because it does not encourage the type of spiritual connections embedded in the African communal life which articulates the collective disposition of the African women. Most western feminists according to her, are middle class lesbians whose actions often offset the significance of family cohesion cherished by the African women. It is expedient to state that lesbianism and homosexual acts or same sex marriage are often frowned at in Africa because they are considered antithetical to the African culture and spiritual ethos. In the same vein, Sue Thornham in 'Second Wave Feminism' has reviewed Rene Denfeld's scathing condemnation of feminism in her book *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (1995). Denfeld lampoons feminism thus:

> In the name of feminism, these extremists have embarked on a moral and spiritual crusade that would take us back to a time worse than our mother's day -back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness. Through a combination of influential voices and unquestioned causes, current feminism would create the very same morally pure yet helplessly martyred role that women suffered from a century ago (47)

For Denfeld, the term 'feminism' unobtrusively implies "an extremist cabal which alienates a younger generation of women in its insistence on pursuing an agenda based on an unswerving belief in female victimisation at the hands of an all-powerful patriarchal system…"(47). Suffice to add here that, Denfeld's submission on feminism seems somewhat simplistic. But the sacrosanct thrust of her argument is aptlygrounded in the problematic embedded in the postfeminist phenomenon which has been significantly articulated in Sarah Gamble's edited book: *The Routledge Companion to feminism and postfeminism* (2001).

Consequently, one could ask, what is the relationship between Okonjo-Ogunyemi's concept of 'womanism' and the female characters of Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Adichie and Chinua Achebe as examined in the paper? The relationship is derived from the fact that the female characters in question are so sensitive to the contemporary demand for African development which calls for untrammeled contributions from both man and woman. It can be observed that female characters in the aforementioned novels come together to provide mutual support as to put in check a perceived patriarchal oppression their progenitors have suffered in the past. These characters recognize and understand the fundamental framework and trajectory of the African polygamous system, hence they are eager to preserve their marriage and their children from the societal crisis often created by the menfolk.

Okonjo-Ogunyemi has offered a useful comment on Emecheta's work, when she remarks that the early Emecheta's works incorporate some English and Irish patriarchal feelings into her writings by 'fighting for survival and wreaking vengeance' (64). Also, she

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

feminizes the 'Black male as the other, a ridiculous object who is destined to be killed' (65).However, Gareth Griffiths has succinctly captured the controversial critical reading of Emecheta's work by the European and American feminists and by African-American women critics and writers. It is a reading often dubbed as 'feminist' which has essentially "led to her denying that her concerns are congruent with those of Western feminists" (Griffiths, 299).Nonetheless, Okonjo-Ogunyemi further alludes that Emecheta's 'heroines are usually strong characters who struggle against patriarchy only to die in childbirth; become enslaved in marriage or die insane; abandoned by the children they nurtured' (65). Again,Okonjo-Ogunyemi assumes that, 'Emecheta's destruction of her heroines is a feminist trait that can be partly attributed to narcissism on the part of the writer (ibid). She concludes that Emecheta's writing was influenced by the frustration she had sufferedwhen her marriage ended in fiasco (p, 64).Emecheta's avowed allegiance to feminism has been further corroborated in Griffiths' words "despite these protestations, it is difficult not to feel that Emecheta's early work, at least, is openly supportive of such a linkage. In her first books, she deals with her experiences as a single parent of five children, following the split between her and her husband…"(299). Inspite of feminism accusation and counter accusation embedded in Emecheta's novels, Okonjo-Ogunyemi acknowledges the crafting of her strong female characters,imbued with thestrident responsibilities that make them unique especially when compared to other female characters in thecorpus of Nigerian female writing (p. 66).

'Motherism' and the Female Nigerian Writers

The accommodation of marital roles, children's development and love for the husband arecharacteristics of the concept of 'motherism'. Catherine Acholonu sees 'motherism' as 'a substitute to feminism, a model to human love, peace and faithfulness to the environment' (Acholonu, 1989: 95). Consequently, Nnu Ego of *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mama and Aunty Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* and Ekwefi in *Things Fall Apart* most times demonstrate a high degree of love for their communities by showing peaceful reactions to some patriarchal encumberances. These female characters most times exhibit peaceful co-existence with their male counterparts, a fundamental feature of 'motherism'.However, some prejudices are still being expressed against women as the 'weaker sex'. Such prejudice is expressed sometimes when Nigerian men engage their women in conversation. One frequently hears words such as, 'don't you know I am a man' 'women are not allowed in here when elders are holding meetings' or even words like 'this job is not for a woman'. These expressions in most Nigerian novels is a microcosm of what obtains in the Nigerian public sphere. Although, in many instances, Nigerian male authors represent these prejudices without affirming them as their own philosophy.However, these writers not only represent these prejudices in their works but have internalized them as a matter of fact. For instance, Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* (1966) creates Elsie a female character who interchangeably becomes the girlfriend of Odili the male narrator and protagonist. At the same time she befriends Chief Nanga

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

the epitome of corruption and a scion of the older generation Nigerian political class.Curious to realize that Achebe extends the same prejudice to his other novel like*Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) where he presents a patronizing relationship between Beatriceand General Sam the Head of State. Suffice to state that, the intention of such prejudice is not to demean womanhood but it is employed as a backlash against the overzealous masculinity pervading contemporary Africa. A check against the display of macho bravado in *Things Fall Apart*is evident in the enduring nature of Chielo a female character and the priestess of Agbala. Chielois assertive and committed in her preoccupation with the rescue of Umofian children from infant mortality. Achebe could have created a male herbalist in form of the priest of 'Alu' to save lives instead of Chielo, but he chooses the other way round to effect a delicate balance between vicious masculinity and supple femininity.

Although African female writers have made consistent attempts at re-assessing the mutual relationship between men and women regarding communal development in the postcolonial Africa. However, some African female writers have vengefully portrayed their male characters as impotent and irresponsible, and make them dependent on women for nurturing and support. Thisnegative portraiture of males created by the female writers has continually pitched them against the male critics (masculinists). Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is a good example of how female writers negatively portray the male characters. She portrays Francis, the male character as an irresponsible and over-dependent husband.

Contemporary Nigerian Writers and Nation-Building

Feminism as a form of criticism has been seen by the male critics to be very offensive, therefore there is not respectable African women writer that has openly, actively and consistently associates herself with the ideology. Just as Nigerian women writers visualize 20th Century issues about women as social predicaments which can be roundly tackled by the women themselves. Rather than shifting the blame solely on men, female writers have continually reflect the plights of all oppressed people in Africa (men inclusive) in their literary works.

Similarly, the Nigeria female writers have consistently focused on the role of women in nation building. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is the first literary work written by a Nigerian female writer to critically examine how a patriarchal custom orchestrates gender violence against women. Efuru, as the woman protagonist tries to use her economic prowess to lift her household from obscurity to relevance is accused of adultery by her irresponsible husband. Although, she was not happy in marriage due to childlessness she doggedly maintains her commitment to her trading (Nwapa, 285). Although, *Efuru* as a first novel is written by a female Nigerian writer who does not essentially hedges male/female equality around but Nwapa "makes it clear that the forces which act to interpellate Efuru as a subject are those of a dominant patriarchy ('distinguished men'), and a self-policing world of women, who construct and perpetuate hegemonic discourses

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

of femininity…(Griffiths, 2000:282). The *Dibia*'s false allegation that Efuru's illness is an aftermath of adultery, ostensibly affirms her suspicion that male interpretations of traditional tenets are often biased and unreliable. Despite Gilbert's irresponsibility, Efuru's enduring entrepreneurial dexterity and Ajanupe's confrontational stance in the novel, further emphasize theplight of the struggling African women in the face of a patriarchal-moderatedsocietal traditions and cultures.

This is a clear indication that women in the precolonial Nigeria have not only provided a complimentary role in the development of a society but they are also assertive in their collective dispositions. Li in Zaynab Alkali's *The Still Born* (1984) is a complete and independent African woman who strives for equality that compliments her relationship with the menfolk to promote sanity and progress in her community. Despite being a male writer, a Gombe bornthird generation Nigerian novelist, Helon Habila problematizes in*Waiting for an Angel* (2004) and *Measuring Time* (2007), the difficulties Nigerian/African women usually experience during political crisis. This obviously shows that the often negative criticism female characters suffer at being portrayed as harsh, wicked and complex at the hands of male writers may have necessitated the woman writer to launch a counter-reaction as to re-create their own stories. The narratives of these female writers undoubtedly "reflect contesting discourses in the modern period, whose partiality is defined by their own speaking positions, and by the gendered practices involved in constructing these conflicting narratives of the traditional past" (Griffith, 287).As a matter of fact, these female writers' narratives have to be re-configured as to shape their understanding of the prevailing African social consciousness that tend to endorse male/female participation.Confronted with the reality of daunting task of restoring order to the commotion that the men-folk has plunged the Nigeria nation-state into since the country attained independence in 1960, the Nigerian female writers have never retreated from exposing the shenanigans of the menfolk.

Combating Gender Inequality in the novels of Nigerian Female Writers

A reading of Lola Shoneyin's *The secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* have shown that female writers in Nigeria have delineated patriarchy in their works and have attempted to use their works not only to champion women's cause but to show how existing cultures and traditions have limited women's aspirations. These writers decry the obtrusive cultural restrictionin their daily activities which ostensibly necessitated their call for a significant change in the African women situation. Similarly,critic and first generation Nigerian women writers, such as Molara Ogundipe, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta among others have used their literary works to combat gender inequality, violence, women unemployment and education for the girl-child in Nigeria. The position of third generation female writers in Nigeria like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lola Shoneyin and Chika Unigwe is divergent from their first and second contemporaries like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Karen King-Aribisala and Zaynab Alkali. Just like the former, the third generation Nigerian female writers celebrate freedom and

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

independence but with a shift in their creative focus. It is a focus which imbues their characters with inner strength, audacity and assertiveness in managing psychological pains whenever they surface. With hindsight, their female characters are fortified withcourage and doggedness with which they can challenge the nagging problems of patriarchy that tend to undermine their social relevance.

To shed more light on the above, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (2011), presents an active female character, Nnu Ego who craves for motherhood in the face of unbridled harsh cultural practices.In the course of striving to have a baby she is suppressed, humiliated and rejected by her primary social constituency, the Igbo patriarchal society. Although she loves her first husband, Amatoku but since she could not give him a child, it is believed that such marriage has failed in the Igbo tradition and by extension African culture. Her inability to frontally contend with the issue of infertility made her return to her father's compound where shegot re-married to Nnaife. This is an arranged marriage that offers her a chance to actualize the enviable status of motherhood.Suffice to state that in Igbo land, it is culturally acceptable for one to be married by proxy or for an arranged marriage to be conducted even though the suitor or the bride is not physically present. Both Nnaife and Nnu Ego met after the marriage when she relocates to Lagos to be joined to him. She immediately discovered that the new husband is not her ideal man but she had to stay in the marriage as a convenience to deflect the prying attention of the people from her object of dissatisfaction.

After a while, Nnu Egodecided to handle the momentous marital shocks with tact and finesse. In no time she became pregnant, but unfortunately lost the pregnancy and the aftermath stress which almost cost her life. However, she later had other children that offered her the much needed motherhood'ssuccour.Sadly, this joy was ephemeral as Nnaife later married Adaku his late brother's widow and another woman in the village. Ironically, Nnu Ego had seven children which included sons and daughters but few weeks later when Adaku had a son, Nnaife's joy knows no bound (*The Joys…,* p.127). This development succinctly illustrates a fact that among wives in a typical African polygamous setting, the husband usually makes a special choice based on primordial sentiments. Nnaife's obvious neglect of Nnu Ego made her unhappy and she felt that her 'chi'-the personal god has misled her.In the novel, the narrative of Nnaife's polygamous contraption moves continuously between the daily bickering among the wives and Nnu Ego's depravity which arouses empathy from the reader. Consequently, the complications arising from the material and conjugal neglect of Nnu Ego eventually hastened her death and she died an unhappy woman.

In Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), the novel is a portrayal of family relationships at various levels leaving women to have a strong role and influence over children. Mothers have roles to play in family development as demonstrated in Mama and Mr. Eugene characters. Mama and the children are usually embodiments of derision by Eugene who openly scorned them. Eugene's insolence derived from his warpedwesternization as much as his encounter with, Christianity and other attitudes

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

antitheticalto the African ways of life. On many occasions Eugene outpours his negative reactions on his family who he intends to raise in the ways of Jesus Christ. Through the activities of Eugene who is now psychologically traumatized and brainwashed by his new found love in Christianity, set a subversive standard for his family which he enforces to the letter. Eugene's inchoate standards lead to brutality, oppression and intense disruption in his family.

A strong character like Mama is ostensibly invested with some dose of assertiveness. Although bizarre, her owning up that she had been feeding Eugene with little portion of food poison in order to kill him by installment becomes imperative in the face of stifling domestic tyranny. This damning revelation comes up after the death of Eugene, his death signaled freedom for Mama and her children in the novel. It is also a testimony that women in contemporary Africa are gradually shedding the toga of inertia and complacency that have held them down in the past. Correspondingly, women characters, such as Aunty Ifeoma, Amaka's mother have a significant role to play in the shaping and bringing up of a family. Their stabilizing role as compassionate mothers with limited predilection for violence, could be read as an attempt to de-masculinize a typical African household that often requires to be held together by the looming portraiture of the father. For instance, Aunty Ifeoma's children admits enjoying some laxity as they could express themselves without any fear of intimidation better than those raised by Jaja and Kambiri and Eugene in the *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie's illustration of Aunty Ifeoma's sustained empathy and her condemnation of Eugene's intrusive high handedness in the novel is meant to set a new standard for family development and women liberation in Africa. Further, Adichie's criticism of the pervasive fang of male domination in the novel unquestionably sets a new paradigm for a collective development that elicits the involvement of men and women. In the same vein, Eugene's fanaticism is seen as a distraction to African development which could be initiated without a recourse to religious bigotry.

However, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* have shown a new vista for the reading of women in Nigerian literature. This is substantiated by the fact that both authors could not hide their obvious identification with the women characters in their novels. Although these characters are not presented as super humans but as women with feelings who are conscious of the need to develop their environment through their motherly contribution. This is seen in Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* who disagrees with Nnaife's privileging of one wife to the disadvantage of the other wives. Also, Mama in *Purple Hibiscus* who decided to tame the excesses of Mr. Eugene by poisoning his food. These authors are not in any way against men but are only responding to women's feelings in Nigerian society which demand some commensurate level of assertiveness.

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

Conclusion

Although Chinua Achebe crafted *Things Fall Apart* to deconstruct the negative perception of the Africans by the European hegemony assufficiently espoused in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. However, Okonkwo's unbridled hedging around of masculinity in *Things Fall Apart* has in turn imprinted, perhaps indelibly on the collective psyche of Nigerian female writers, a sense of oppression, manipulation and undeserving subordination. Their revulsion at Okonkwo's domination is due, not simply to his inevitable pursuit of ambition and fame, but rather his wanton subordination of his wives and other women. A practice derived from the African patriarchal system. The paper affirms that the novel has opened the vista for other works of feminism in contemporary Nigeria and also in the other parts of Africa. Achebe's privileging of masculinity in *Things Fall Apart*has undoubtedly opened a floodgate of a further discussion on the topic of patriarchy as it erodesAfrican women liberation. Without been exhaustive, the paper has illustrated that assertiveness has always been part of African woman's psyche as observed in some female characters in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

A trait which has been further strengthened in the front line novels of the Nigerian female writers like Nwapa, Emecheta, Alkali and Adichie. The paper has essentially acknowledged that assertiveness has become a necessary tool which the Nigerian female writers have invested in their female characters for the purpose of checkmating the overbearing nature of patriarchy in the contemporary Nigeria and generally in Africa. In deciding to interrogate the oppressive impact of patriarchy in their literary works, the Nigerian female writers are convinced that men would need to lend their invaluable support to the women in order to attain the highest ideals desired for Africa's socio-economic transformation.

WORKS CITED

Achebe, Chinua.*A Man of the People*. London: Heinemann, 1966.

Achebe, Chinua.*Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Heinemann, 1987.

Achebe, Chinua. 'The African Writer and the English Language (1975)'.

Global Literary Theory: An Anthology.Oxon: Routledge, 2013.

Achebe, Chinua.*Things Fall Apart*. London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1958.

Acholonu, Catherine. *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. Owerri:Afa Publications pp 12,89, 1995.

Adichie, Chimamanda.*Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Farafina, 2006.

Alkali, Zaynab.*The Still Born*. Harlow: Longman, 1984.

Butler, Judith.*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge pp 4-10, 1990.

Butler, Judith.*Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge and London,1997.

Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970.

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)

Cary, Joyce.*Mister Johnson*. London: Michael Johnson Ltd, 1939.
Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. United Kingdom: Random House, 2008.
Chukwuma, Helen. 2003. Accents on the African Novel. 2nd ed. Nigeria. Port Harcourt: Pearl Publishers, p. 19- 23, 2003.
Emecheta, Buchi.*The Joys of Motherhood*. London: Heinemann, 2011.
Emecheta, Buchi.*Second Class Citizen*. London: Flamingo, 1989.
Griffiths, Gareth. *African Literature in English: East and West*. England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000.
Habila, Helon.*Measuring Time*. Abuja: Cassava Republic Press, 2007.
Habila, Helon.*Waiting for an Angel*. Abuja. Cassava Republic Press, 2004.
Nwapa, Flora. *Efuru*. Enugu, Nigeria: Tana Press, 1966.
Ogunyemi, Christopher Babatunde. 'Wisdom and Age in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart'. *Literary Paritantra (Systems).An International Journal on Literature and Theory*. Vol 2 No 1 & 2 pp 53-60, 2010.
Okonjo-Ogunyemi, Chikwenye. 'Introduction and Chapter I *African Wo/Man Palava*: *The Nigerian Novel by Woman*. Chicago: U,Chicago Press, 1995.
Okonjo-Ogunyemi,Chikwenye. 'Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English'. *Journal of Woman in Culture and Society*. Pp 63-80, 1985.
Okpara, Chioma. 'The Foot as Metaphor in Female Dreams: Analysis of Zaynab Alkalis Novels' *Literature and Black Aesthestics*. Ed. Ernest N. Emenyonu. Ibadan: Heinemann, pp: 11, 17-18, 1990.
Shoneyin, Lola.*The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Nigeria: Profile Books, 2010.
Thornham, Sue.'Second Wave Feminism', *TheRoutledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. Ed. Sarah Gamble. London & New York: Routledge, PP: 29-42, 2001.
Unigwe, Chika.*On Black Sisters' Street*. London: Vintage Books, 2010.

BDD-A27273 © 2017 Universitatea Petru Maior
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:06:54 UTC)