

## LANGUAGE AND MISOGYNY IN LITERARY DISCOURSE: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S "THINGS FALL APART"

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### Abstract

This research paper is an examination of language and misogyny in literary discourse through a linguistic analysis of Chinua Achebe's novel, "Things Fall Apart." The study explores how language constructs and perpetuates gender-based prejudices, particularly misogyny, within the context of a postcolonial African society. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of female characters, particularly Okonkwo's wives and other women in the Igbo community, in order to find out the linguistic devices employed by the author to express and reinforce patriarchal ideologies. Using a qualitative approach, the paper draws on linguistic theory to critically evaluate the language used by Achebe and its implications on gender dynamics. The study reveals that Achebe's use of language, although rich in cultural expression, often reflects and perpetuates traditional gender norms and power structures. Through linguistic devices such as metaphors, proverbs, and direct dialogue, women are frequently depicted as submissive, objectified, and relegated to domestic roles, contributing to their marginalization within the narrative. Furthermore, the research highlights instances where women's voices and perspectives are silenced or dismissed, leading to a reinforcement of their subordinate status in the community. The analysis further explicates how language reinforces existing biases, contributing to the perpetuation of misogyny and patriarchal norms in broader societal contexts. The findings reveal that misogynistic language is indeed present in the Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart', as there were cases of objectification, marginalization, and discriminatory attitudes towards female characters.

**Key Words:** Misogyny, Sexism, Marginalization, Intersectionality, Literary Discourse

### Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that shapes the way we perceive the world and influences our understanding of societal norms and values. Within the realm of literature, language serves as the medium through which authors convey their messages, reflect on cultural intricacies, and portray complex human experiences. However, literature is not exempt from societal biases, and it often mirrors prevailing attitudes towards various social groups, including women. Misogyny, defined as the deep-seated hatred, contempt, or prejudice against women, has found its way into literary works, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards women.

According to Code L. (2000), the term "misogyny" is derived from the Ancient Greek word "mīsoḡunīā" which means hatred towards women. Misogyny has taken shape in multiple forms such as male privilege, patriarchy, gender discrimination, sexual harassment, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification (346). Freeland C. (1994), opines that misogyny over years has evolved as an ideology which has engulfed the society as a smog which diminishes their site to aurora. Great philosophers, socialist, and thinkers of golden era were subdued by roars of male dominant society which narrowed their vision and made them a supporter of patriarchal society. Aristotle who was an ancient Greek philosopher and scientist was also a misogynist. He thought of women as a deformity, an incomplete male. He preached that men should always command and women should follow as they are the inferior being created by God. Eno Ekpenyong Umana (2010) has this to say:

Women in the modern world are usually confronted by misogyny in their natal and matrimonial homes, in their

religious practices, at their work places as well as within their communities mainly because they were born female (p.1).

Women in the modern world are usually confronted by misogyny in their natal and matrimonial homes, in their religious practices, at their work places as well as within their communities mainly because they were born female. Chinua Achebe's novel, "Things Fall Apart," portrays the intricate social fabric of Igbo society, tackling themes of culture, tradition, and the consequences of societal change. While celebrated for its profound insights and compelling storytelling, "Things Fall Apart" also presents a platform to explore the presence and impact of misogynistic language in literary discourse. Scholars have long recognized the importance of studying literary works to understand societal attitudes and perceptions. According to Eagleton (2016), literature serves as a "cultural mirror," reflecting the values, ideologies, and biases of the society in which it is produced. In this context, the portrayal of women and gender dynamics in literature holds significant implications for understanding how societies perceive and treat women.

Recognizing that literature mirrors life, Kure and Babajo (2009) posit that since literary materials are rooted in identifiable communities and societies they portray real persons as experience or studied from real life. Usoro (2009) adds that writers draw from the rich cultural well of their societies. The above authors' perceptions present literature as evidence of people's experiences in the society. The study of misogyny in literary discourse is therefore relevant. This research therefore, seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding misogyny in literature by focusing on Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" as a case study. Through a nuanced analysis of language, representation, and cultural context, we hope to shed light on the complex interplay between literature, language, and gender dynamics. By examining the presence and impact of misogynistic language in "Things Fall Apart," we aim to foster critical discussions about representation, gender equality, and the transformative potential of literature in shaping societal attitudes towards women.

## **Problem of the Study**

The research identifies instances of misogynistic language, sexist remarks, or demeaning portrayals of women in the novel. It assesses how the use of misogynistic language influences the characterization of female characters in the novel. It aims to understand how such language shapes the portrayal of women and their roles in the story. It aims to examine the ways in which language contributes to the marginalization or empowerment of female characters.

## **Research Objectives**

The specific research objectives of the study are as follows:

- i. To identify misogynistic expressions and stereotypes in Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart."
- ii. To examine the linguistic patterns and expressions that perpetuate misogynistic attitudes towards women.
- iii. To explore the prevailing cultural and historical factors within Igbo society that influence the use of misogynistic language and the representation of women in "Things Fall Apart".

## **Research Methodology**

The research adopts a qualitative research design, specifically a textual analysis approach. The researcher examines misogynistic language in Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" through an exploration of language use, character interactions, and cultural representations within the novel. Specific passages, dialogues, and descriptions that contain instances of

misogynistic language are identified and recorded. The entire text of "Things Fall Apart" will be the primary source for data collection.

## Research Questions

- i. What are the misogynistic expressions and stereotypes found Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart"?
- ii. What are the linguistic patterns and expressions that perpetuate misogynistic attitudes towards women?
- iii. What are the prevailing cultural and historical factors within the Igbo society that influence the use of misogynistic language and the representation of women in "Things Fall Apart"?

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework employed in the analysis of misogynistic language and the representation of women in "Things Fall Apart" is primarily rooted in feminist literary theory. Feminist literary theory is a critical framework that examines literature through a gender-conscious lens, with a focus on understanding and challenging the representation of women, gender dynamics, and power structures within literary works. It emerged as a response to the historically marginalized and misrepresented role of women in literature and aimed to highlight the ways in which literary texts both reflect and shape societal attitudes towards gender.

In exploring the concept of misogyny, feminist literary theory becomes a vital approach through which to analyze and interpret literary texts. Feminist scholars such as Showalter (1979) argue that examining how female characters are represented and the language used to describe them can reveal underlying power structures and gender hierarchies. Feminist literary theory aims to examine how gender, power, and patriarchy influence the representation of women in literature. It seeks to discover and critique the ways in which literary works may perpetuate or challenge societal norms and stereotypes related to gender. By applying feminist literary theory to "Things Fall Apart," the analysis delves into the novel's treatment of female characters, language use, and gendered power dynamics.

By applying feminist literary theory to the analysis of "Things Fall Apart," this study aims to shed light on the representation of women and the impact of misogynistic language within the novel. It also invites critical engagement with how literature reflects and challenges gender norms, contributing to broader discussions on gender representation in literature and the potential for literature to influence societal attitudes towards women and gender dynamics.

## Analysis

### Research Question 1

#### **What are the misogynistic expressions found within the text of "Things Fall Apart"?**

In "Things Fall Apart," Chinua Achebe portrays a pre-colonial Igbo society with deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and gender roles. Throughout the novel, instances of misogynistic language, slurs, and stereotypes can be identified, reflecting the prevailing attitudes towards women during that historical period. Some specific examples include objectification and dehumanization of the female folk. Women are often referred to using derogatory terms that reduce them to mere objects or possessions. Highlighting their perceived inferior status in society, "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children."

In addition, the language used to depict women often reinforces their limited agency and subservient roles. Female characters are expected to submit to the will of their husbands and

male relatives without question, and their desires and aspirations are often disregarded. This expression equally points to subjugation of female in the Nigerian society.

What have women to do with the gods?

Misogynistic language includes gendered insults directed at women, implying their perceived weaknesses or inferiority. Women are often portrayed as being irrational, emotional, and incapable of making rational decisions. These stereotypes perpetuate the notion that women are unfit for leadership or decision-making roles. The novel occasionally blames women for certain negative outcomes or events, reinforcing harmful victim-blaming attitudes. For instance, in the case of the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son, Okonkwo is asked to atone by bringing a virgin girl, further objectifying and devaluing young women. The excerpt below shows the level at which women are objectified.

And so when he called Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten murmured something about guns that never shot. Unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard it and ran madly into his room for the loaded gun, ran out again and aimed at her as she clattered over the dwarf wall of the barn. He pressed the trigger and there was a loud report accompanied by the wail of his wives and children. ...and there lay the woman, very much shaken and frightened but quite unhurt. (p. 31)

Again, the novel depicts rituals and practices that perpetuate the subordination of women, such as the "bride-price" system, where women are treated as commodities exchanged between families.

'Yes,' replied Obierika. 'My daughter's suitor is coming today and I hope we will clinch the matter of the bride-price. I want you to be there. (p. 51)

The language used in the novel often reflects a double standard between men and women, with men being praised for certain actions while women are condemned for the same behaviors. Female characters in the novel are frequently silenced or discouraged from expressing their opinions or desires, contributing to their disempowerment. On the other hand, female characters in the novel are frequently silenced or discouraged from expressing their opinions or desires, contributing to their disempowerment.

It is essential to note that these instances of misogynistic language are not a reflection of the author's personal beliefs but rather a deliberate portrayal of the societal norms prevalent in the historical context of the novel. Achebe's depiction serves as a critique of the patriarchy and colonialism that perpetuated such attitudes, inviting readers to reflect on the consequences of misogynistic language and gender inequality in societies past and present.

## **Research Question 2**

**What are the linguistic patterns and expressions that perpetuate misogynistic attitudes towards women?**

In "Things Fall Apart," misogynistic language is used to depict and describe female characters in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate societal norms prevalent in pre-colonial Igbo society. The language employed to portray women highlights their perceived inferiority, limited agency, and subservient roles. Several linguistic patterns associated with such portrayals are explicated below:

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Female characters are often referred to as objects or possessions of male characters, emphasizing their subordinate status in society. For example, Okonkwo's wife is referred to as "the man's property" thereby reducing her to a mere possession. The language used to describe women frequently focuses on their physical attributes rather than their personality or intellect. This emphasis on appearance reinforces the objectification of women. Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife for instance, is often admired for her beauty. Her attractiveness is frequently mentioned, reducing her to a physical attribute rather than recognizing her as a complex individual. This type of objectification diminishes her worth to her appearance. Again, Okonkwo beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo during the Week of Peace for neglecting to prepare his meal on time. The act of beating her objectifies her as a subordinate who failed to meet her domestic duties, reducing her agency and autonomy. Again, the practice of giving brides as part of alliances or settlements, such as Ikemefuna being given to Umuofia as compensation, objectifies women as commodities to be exchanged for other goods or services. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo views his wives as possessions that he owns. He thinks of them as part of his property and exercises control over them, demonstrating a possessive attitude. Consider the excerpt below:

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. (p. 11)

Female characters are expected to be submissive and show deference to male characters, reflecting the cultural expectations of the time. Women are often depicted as speaking softly and deferring to men in their speech. The objectification of women is also manifests in the novel.

In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess. Okonkwo's neighbours heard his wife crying and sent their voices over the compound walls to ask what was the matter. (p. 24)

Okonkwo's refusal to stop beating someone even during the Week of Peace indicates his prioritization of dominance and control over cultural and spiritual norms. This choice exemplifies the objectification of women as he values his own authority and aggression above the sacredness of the tradition and the well-being of those affected. Again, the name 'woman' was also used in a derogatory manner; it connotes poverty and inability to attain greater heights. This is explicated in the excerpt:

Only a week ago, a man had contradicted him (Okonkwo) at a kindred meeting which they held to discuss the next ancestral feast. Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: This meeting is for men. The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit. (21)

Okonkwo's response to the man who contradicted him during the meeting is a clear demonstration of the relegation of women to the background. He emphasizes the societal expectation that women should not have a voice in such matters. In this context, being a "woman" is used as an insult, implying weakness, lack of authority, and inability to hold significant positions. The act of calling the man a woman is a means of undermining his credibility and dismissing his opinions. The passage also alludes to the importance of titles within the society. Men with titles hold positions of authority and respect. The fact that the man who contradicted Okonkwo had no titles further contributes to his marginalized status. It

suggests that without titles, a man's opinions are easily disregarded, much like a woman's opinions. The excerpt below contains misogynistic language:

When did you become a shivering old woman', Okonkwo asked himself, 'you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed'. (p. 51)

The use of such misogynistic language emphasize the perceived weaknesses or inferiority of women. The power of women is often downplayed in the novel, and they are portrayed as having limited decision-making power. Their desires and aspirations are disregarded, and they are expected to follow the wishes of their husbands and male relatives without question. Female characters' voices are often silenced or suppressed, with their opinions and desires considered less important or relevant. They are discouraged from expressing themselves openly and are confined to traditional gender roles. Misogynistic language occasionally blames women for negative outcomes or events, contributing to victim-blaming attitudes. Women are held responsible for certain tragedies, further perpetuating their marginalization.

It must be stressed that the linguistic patterns associated with the portrayal of female characters in "Things Fall Apart" serve to reinforce gender stereotypes and traditional gender roles, presenting women as subservient and inferior to men. Misogynistic language is instrumental in depicting women as passive and conforming to societal expectations, while simultaneously limiting their agency and opportunities for self-expression.

### Research Question 3

**What are the prevailing cultural and historical factors within the Igbo society that influence the use of misogynistic language and the representation of women in "Things Fall Apart"?**

The use of misogynistic language and the representation of women are deeply influenced by the prevailing cultural and historical factors of the Igbo society. Several key factors contribute to the portrayal of women and the language used to describe them. The Pre-colonial Igbo society was organized around a patriarchal social structure, where men held primary authority and power. Women were generally assigned subordinate roles and had limited decision-making power in public and private spheres. This patriarchal system influenced the language used to describe women as objects or possessions of men. Again, gender roles were clearly defined in Igbo society, and women were expected to fulfill specific duties primarily related to domestic work and child-rearing. The language used in the novel reflects these traditional expectations and reinforces the idea that women's primary role is to serve and support men.

In addition, the custom of paying bride-price for marriage was prevalent in pre-colonial Igbo society. This practice further objectified women and reinforced the perception that women were exchanged between families, contributing to their objectification and reduced agency. Furthermore, the reverence for ancestral spirits and adherence to cultural traditions played a significant role in shaping gender norms and expectations. Traditional rituals and customs often perpetuated the marginalization of women, and the language used in the novel reflects the role of women as participants in these rituals rather than active decision-makers. The use of oral tradition and storytelling in Igbo culture influenced the representation of women in the novel. Stories and proverbs were passed down through generations, reinforcing gender stereotypes and perpetuating certain language patterns associated with women.

More importantly, leadership roles in Igbo society were predominantly occupied by men, both at the family and community levels. Women were excluded from decision-making processes, and their voices were often silenced. This gendered power dynamic influenced the portrayal of female characters and the language used to depict them. The pre-colonial Igbo society valued tradition and resisted external influences. As a result, the cultural norms and language used in the novel perpetuated misogyny.

## Findings

The novel reflects the traditional gender roles and language associated with the Igbo culture. Women are often depicted as homemakers and caretakers, and their language use is reflective of their limited social roles. They are seldom given an opportunity to voice their opinions and are primarily shown through the eyes of male characters. The relationship between language and power within the Igbo society is explicated in the novel. Men, as the dominant gender, often use language to assert their authority and maintain control over women and other marginalized groups. They set the linguistic norms and standards, while women's language is often restricted and circumscribed by societal expectations.

Furthermore, Achebe's portrayal of the Igbo society highlights the patriarchal nature of the culture, where men hold positions of authority and make most decisions. This power dynamic is evident in the language they use, which reinforces their dominance and subjugates women. There are instances where women's voices are silenced or dismissed, either directly or indirectly, due to the prevailing patriarchal norms and practices. The use of linguistic biased words and expressions reflect unequal power dynamics between male and female genders. Again, despite the limited representation of female characters and their restricted language use, some women in the novel of the Igbo society. By examining the representation of women's language, one can gain insights into the cultural norms and values associated with gender roles in pre-colonial Igbo communities.

## Conclusion

The novel's depiction of the Igbo society reflects deeply ingrained gender hierarchies and oppressive norms, which are mirrored in the linguistic choices characters make. The language used to describe women, their roles, and interactions underscores their marginalized position and limited agency. Achebe's narrative, however, is not a simple endorsement of these misogynistic norms. Through the strategic use of language, the author provides subtle openings for critique and resistance. This analysis explicates the complex interplay between language, culture, and gender dynamics, illustrating that while language can serve as a vehicle for perpetuating misogyny, it can also be a tool for empowerment and transformation. "Things Fall Apart" invites readers to engage critically with the language used to shape societal norms, and by extension, encourages us to examine and challenge our own linguistic and cultural assumptions. The researcher concludes that the novel serves as a reminder that language is a dynamic force that both reflects and shapes the world we inhabit, and it is through careful examination and conscientious use that we can work towards dismantling oppressive linguistic structures and fostering a more equitable society.

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