

The Gendered Tongue: Language as a Differentiator in the Works of Chinua Achebe

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ABSTRACT

In literature, language is employed in constructing gender, the function of each gender type delineated using language and linguistic resources that replicate the unbalanced views of the society on male and female genders. In his works Achebe employs language to exalt the masculine gender while depicting the female gender as docile, half – witted, frail and careless. His choice of vocabulary and grammar in the linguistic construction of the male and female genders in the work serve as a reflection to the pre- colonial Igbo society’s respective attitudes towards them. This paper seeks to explore how Achebean language reflects the social reality of the relationships between men and women in the Igbo society. It also shows how language serves as an instrument of oppression, subordination and exclusion of women. Through the language one gets an insight into how the generic male gender wields an untold influence over women.

Keywords: language, culture, gender, oral culture, postcolonialism, folktales

INTRODUCTION

The diction employed in the speech of the female characters in Chinua Achebe’s works, the manner in which their language is structured and the matters on which they hold discussions through language portray them as docile, weak and foolish while the men’s language is filled with violence, the notion of domination and the suppression of women. Achebean language reveals the unequal power relations within the Igbo society and the entitlement the men are subjected to. The language is embedded in asymmetries and displays the gender disparity in the Igbo tribal community.

In our socio – cultural surroundings subsist certain linguistic disparities which function as gender differentiators and divulge one gender’s perspective of another. In *The Creation of Patriarchy* Gerda Lerner defines gender as a “costume, a mask, a straitjacket in which men and women dance their unequal dance” (238). The phrase ‘unequal dance’ as used by Gerda encompasses the socio – cultural framework of prejudice abetted by language. Gender therefore, is an outcome of social interaction, its construct enabled by the beliefs of a particular society embedded in their language and conveyed through it. This functions in tandem with Duranti’s belief that “language can do things beyond the performative function of words such as promise, pronounce and apologize” (458).

In literature, language is employed in constructing gender, the function of each gender delineated using linguistic intricacies that replicate the unbalanced views of the society on both genders.

CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe employs language to exalt the masculine gender while depicting the female gender as docile, half-witted, frail and careless. His choice of vocabulary and grammar in the linguistic construction of the male and female genders in the work serve as a reflection to the pre-colonial Igbo society's respective attitudes towards them. This dimension is exhibited in the language of many of the characters in the novel.

It is important to note the intense procedure adopted by Okonkwo to ensure that his son Nwoye, and Ikemefuna become men. The ideology behind this rigorous procedure is to ensure that Nwoye and Ikemefuna do not appear effeminate since the yam represents masculinity. Okonkwo's daughters are unmentioned, exhibiting the neglect of women in the pre-colonial Igbo society and further demonstrating gender role specification Achebe manipulates language into portraying women as incautious and heedless while the men are pictured as intelligent and meticulous. This is suggested by how none of the boys broke their pots while Obiageli did.

The meaning of the name Obiageli 'I have come to eat' further alludes that an attempt at disseminating a negative image of the woman is being made, showing that they chase pleasure, not work. "So, Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his Obi, and he told them stories of the land, masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (Achebe 42). Okonkwo's narration of the stories depicting bloodbath and barbarity to the boys suggests how young men are taught to be strong and callous with language acting as a conveyor of such ideas. A form of education or indoctrination, this segregates the functions of men and women in a particular society and promotes gendered roles. Acting as custodians of their wives and children, men are groomed to fight battles whereas women are confined to a domesticated life. This divulges the fact that the transmission and expression of patriarchal structures occurs through literature and language respectively, and sets the male and female genders apart. "At the beginning of their journey, the men of Umuofia talked about locusts, about their women, and some effeminate men who had refused to come with them" (Achebe 47). Here the adjective 'effeminate' is used in reference to men who refrained from participating in Ikemefuna's execution. The word 'effeminate' used for the depiction of these men serves as a form of humiliation, for they are being classified as feminine, the word feminine being synonymous to weak based on the prejudiced ideology of the Igbos. At the same time this also projects the shallowness of men and their masculinity as they could go to any extent to exhibit it, even when it involved murdering Ikemefuna who had resided with Okonkwo for three years and addressed him as father.

LANGUAGE AS DIFFERENTIATOR

Through the subtle usage of such varying expressions for both men and women, Achebe harnesses language to showcase gender differentiation. Achebe's linguistic choices demonstrate the distinct ways in which men and women are regarded in the pre-colonial Igbo society. Through the author's language and diction in *Things Fall Apart* it is evident how women are treated as Spivakian subalterns in a patriarchal society whereas men hold a domineering role. The second volume of

Achebe's African trilogy, *No longer at Ease* is a continuation of the epic saga of the Igbo community in *Things Fall Apart*. The novel stands parallel to its predecessor when it comes to the representation of the disparity amidst the male and female genders. For the Igbos "the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities" (Selden, Widdowson and Brooker 121).

The quotation above radiates male domination. Ezeulu beginning the quotation with 'in our custom' portrays how his belief boasts of cultural consensus. Denigration of the female gender serves as the primary function of the language, manipulated to suit the patriarchal societal structure and the male centered outlook. The usage of the expression 'if she has any sense will not boast about it or even open her mouth or speak of it' suggests how in the Umofian society women are deemed as senseless creatures, dehumanized and are barred from being opinionated which in terms is a violation of their psycho – social rights. As Mezu says "... women, in men's thinking, remains man's property and his spoils of love whose pristine virtue must remain intact" (217). The marginalization of women in the text results from the language lacking a female perspective. Verbal communication acts as the vector of gender discrimination. "How does it concern you what I do with my son?" (Achebe 45). Here Ezeulu efficiently discards his wife Ngoye from having a conversation when she addresses the issue of Oduche, their son, going to the white new orthodoxy, by saying 'my son'. The expression suggests that despite of having a substantial share in the cultivation of the child, the woman is denied a say in its crucial life decisions, for that is considered to be the man's domain. It also enlightens the fact how women are treated as reproductive vessels and the man, post the child's birth has the sole authority on it. Deprived of the decisive power, Igbo women were denied expression of their views in the social and familial arena.

The addressal of Matefi as "woman" and not through her name depicts the lack of compassion on Ezeulu's part and the commanding tone of the language dismissing the woman as an independent, self – contained unit. In the Igbo society women have an almost negligible share of the privilege of liberty. They are abstained from attending meetings and exchanging ideas. After Ezeulu the priest is released from exile, people visit him. Here the narrator says, "In the course of the second day, he counted fifty-seven visitors excluding women" (Achebe 187). The expression 'excluding women' caters to the fact how women are treated as secondary characters who just perform the role of bystanders, their presence being intentionally left unacknowledged. Barred from participating in social affairs, they themselves are a representation of an 'excluded entity'.²⁹ Achebe's language in the novel is a conveyor of female marginalization and subordination. Jones argues that "the perceived existence of two clear, fixed and opposing genders is part of an ideological system. Ideologies are prevalent ideas of what is normal or natural and they vary from culture to culture. Our experiences in a given society provide us with particular beliefs and our position in that society (in terms of our class, gender...)" (210- 211). These 'ideologies' are then disseminated through the Foucauldian discourse and "are invoked and reinforced through the language that is used to talk about men and women" (Jones 211).

CONCLUSION

Embedded in these 'ideologies' of gender-based discrimination is Achebe's language. Through the diction and language employed in the *Arrow of God*, Chinua Achebe manifests and brings to the fore an authentic portrayal of the Igbo society. The language, unequivocally, highlights the prevalent

misogyny, the perpetration of inhumanity and atrocities on women by men and the suppression of their consciousness. Concluding Achebe's remarkable trilogy chronicling three generations of an African community, the Igbos, *No Longer at Ease* shows Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel an optimistic young man lost in a cultural limbo and a Nigeria entering a new age of disgruntlement. Parallely, it is also a continuation of the unequal gender dynamics in the Igbo community, with the language structured to picture and endorse the notion of male hegemony. Enlightened and emancipated courtesy the Western education, Clara is a paradigm of the modern African woman.

The language of Clara's character is an exemplification of her assertiveness. The expression 'Leave me, Ojare' shows how her language and consciousness are liberated of patriarchal hegemony. Chinua Achebe reforms his language to accommodate it with feminist features, depicting the increasing empowerment of Achebean female characters. Clara's 'snatching her hand away' showcases how Achebe transforms his female characters into being expressive by assigning the language with a female oriented perspective, unlike of those female predecessors who were mute spectators to them being violated and could not oppose it. This capacity to resist her man and express agitation find absolutely no mention in the earlier novels. The changes employed in the language point towards the boost in female agency and discarding the socio – cultural factors that militate against the female gender. 31 Clara's character possesses a domineering demeanor. When Obi declares his love for her, she boldly tells him: "I can't marry you..." "I am an Osu..." "So, you see we cannot get married," she said, quite firmly almost gaily – a terrible kind of gaiety (Achebe 63- 64). The language of Clara 's character displays her self – assurance and pragmatism. Through her expression 'I can't marry you' she firmly projects her denial is forming a matrimonial association with Obi, the protagonist. Her speech portrays her as adamant and a woman who highly regards her views. Clara has "no coyness in her" (Achebe 64) or her language. Straightforwardly and unhesitatingly, she states 'I am an Osu', even when referring to such an enfeebling and dehumanizing practice of caste system prevalent in the Igbo society where the Osus were the outcasts and subjected to brutality on the hands of those ranking high in the caste system. Post an unwanted pregnancy when even the doctor they consult for abortion advises them to get married, Clara cuts in determinedly, "I don't want to marry him..." "I say I won't marry him. Isn't that enough?" (Achebe 132) Clara's language suggests her firmness and the ability to abide by her opinions when she reiterates the fact that she won't marry Obi. Her language is filled with the elements of freedom of expression unlike her female predecessors in the Achebean literary universe. Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* is a diversion from the normative subordination of the female gender to the male gender, for the language of the novel witnesses a slight purgation from its male oriented outlook and provides the female with the agency to express themselves. The relationship between language and gender in the works of Achebe underlines inequality, elevates cognizance and evaluates progress. It also highlights how gender differentiation is internalized and perpetrated through the way one's language is structured, the female gender's language hosting the elements of hesitancy and uncertainty while that of the male gender showcasing technical or competitive communication styles, meaning that "a speaker may use language that carries a particular ideological meaning associated with their gender, in turn gendering their identity performance" (Jones 214).

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