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Chinua Achebe's Stance on Feminism in "Things Fall Apart"

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe is considered as a prolific Nigerian author who has contributed significantly to African literature. Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" forms the basis of this research paper. Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" is a novel that explores the clash between the Igbo traditional way of life and the Western colonial culture in Nigeria. While the novel does not explicitly focus on feminism, it does present some interesting perspectives on the roles of women in Igbo society. The purpose of this paper is to understand the treatment of African communities under British rule and African women under the patriarchal margin prevalent during the period and the way patriarchal margin within the African community affected the role of its women in the society.

Key words: Colonialism, Feminism, African Culture

Introduction

Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer and critic, was known for his works that explored the complexities of African culture and colonialism. In terms of his stance on feminism, Achebe's views were multifaceted and evolved throughout his career. In his early works, such as "Things Fall Apart," Achebe portrayed a patriarchal society where women had limited agency and were often subjugated to the authority of men. However, Achebe also recognized

the strength and resilience of African women, and portrayed them as key players in the social fabric of their communities.

Review of Literature

Feminism in its most basic definition states the equality of the sexes. In the context of postcolonial studies, this term hardly occupies a place. Men who had the upper hand in everything had the power to suppress a woman and belittle her duties to the most basic and ‘womanly’ of all while somehow convincing them that what was assigned to them held the highest responsibility they could carry as a woman. Margery Perham in her book, *Native Administration in Nigeria*, talks about a significant case of a feminist and anti-colonial protest during the British colonial history in Nigeria known as the “Aba Women Riot”. This riot was led by thousands of women in the provinces of Owerri and Calabar in South-Eastern Nigeria in 1929 against the British imposed high taxes for doing business in the markets. The British administration stood its ground on the market tax law killing over 50 women to end the riot. Similarly, the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya is another similar feminist anti-colonial revolution. Not all the kikuyu women were involved in direct confrontation with the colonial authorities as they were split into groups so some will be involved in logistic roles such as gathering information, smuggling arms, food and medical supplies to their men who are fighting against the colonial powers. This part of the paper analyses not only these aspects of feminist struggle undertaken by black women in Nigeria but also their struggles in daily life activities where their participation and presence contributed to hardly any significant change in public affairs. Since Achebe’s books do not specify this facet of colonisation, the scholar will be attempting to expand her line of study in retrospect to women’s encounters with their own people and with the British administration.

Analysis

At the later phase of his writing ventures Achebe began to more explicitly critique the limitations placed on women in African societies. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* portrays two worlds as experienced by the people living in that era. One, a collective experience of the African people involuntarily colonised by the British and second, the plight of women whose unheard voices form the backbone in this research’s discourse:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 176)

It not only describes the plight of the people but also of the regional and cultural differences that those eras presented. One side of this context explores the discriminatory experiences of the African people under the British colonial rule while on the other side of the novel, African women silently pass through the hard stages of life where they have no role in the decision making of their husbands and the society: “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (Achebe 53). The African lot in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* are divided by opinions that separate them into two sets, one that believes in the ideals of the British and one that strives to uphold pure Nigerian culture, traditions and value systems. It is not that one set of people started thinking that the British values made them sophisticated but it was fear of having to see or feel the loss of a loved one from being under the clutches of the colonists that some of them decided to settle with the laid out set of rules. Whereas in the other context, Achebe’s novel indirectly explores the lives of women who, in a way, live a life that is like two sides of a coin, one of comfort and one of vulnerability where the comfort they can obtain is from being safe under their husbands’ care while being vulnerable to a system without equality and representation. Vulnerability has already been part of their lives for so long that even if they get a chance to voice their opinions they don’t feel heard anymore. Postcolonial femininity as explored through this novel expands in detail the dilemma of representation, equality and discrimination faced by the African women and studies the factors that led to the diminishing of women’s needs and opinions during the colonial period.

Through this research, the plight of the African community is explored from two variant points of view to understand and analyse the differences in the experiences of the community, writing of the time period and the adjoining circumstances that paved the way to racism in South Africa.

In "Things Fall Apart," the main female character is Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi. Ekwefi is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who defies the traditional gender roles assigned to women in her society. For

example, she refuses to be submissive to her husband, and she also defies the custom of female genital mutilation, which is seen as a rite of passage for girls in the community:

As [Ekwefi] buried one child after another her sorrow gave way to the despair and then to grim resignation. The birth of her children, which should be a woman's crowning glory, became for Ekwefi mere physical agony devoid of promise. The naming ceremony after seven market weeks became an empty ritual (Achebe 205)

Additionally, the novel portrays the importance of women in Igbo society as mothers and caretakers of the home. Women are seen as the backbone of the family, and their contributions are highly valued. Achebe also highlights the influence of women in decision-making processes in the community, as they are consulted during important matters and are considered important stakeholders.

However, it is important to note that the novel also portrays the limitations and discrimination faced by women in Igbo society. Women are not allowed to participate in governance or decision-making processes at the village level, and they are often forced into arranged marriages. They are also expected to be submissive to their husbands and to perform domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

In his essay "The Role of Women in the Igbo Society," Achebe argues that women in traditional Igbo society were not inherently subservient to men, but rather were oppressed by a system that placed men in positions of power. He advocated for a reevaluation of traditional gender roles and the empowerment of women in African societies.

In later works, such as "Anthills of the Savannah," Achebe portrayed female characters who actively challenged traditional gender roles and worked to assert their independence and agency. These characters were often met with resistance and violence from men in positions of power, but Achebe highlighted their bravery and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Conclusion

Overall, Achebe's stance on feminism can be characterized as one of advocacy for gender equality and the empowerment of women in African societies. While his earlier works portrayed patriarchal societies, Achebe recognized the inherent strength of women and ultimately sought to challenge and subvert traditional gender roles in his writing. In conclusion, while "Things Fall Apart" is not a feminist text per se, it does offer some insights into the roles of women in Igbo society. The novel portrays the strength and resilience of women, while also highlighting the limitations and discrimination they face. The novel presents a complex and nuanced view of gender roles in Igbo society, and it provides an opportunity to reflect on the importance of gender equality and the empowerment of women in all societies.

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