

Search of the Lost Body in Things Fall Apart and Heart of Darkness: Genders in Conflict

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Abstract

An awareness of gender is important when approaching post colonial texts such as *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, because women undergo experiences very differently from colonial and post colonial world. The experience of women within empire was often one of double oppressions. Whereas colonized men had to be subservient to their colonial masters, colonized women often had to be subservient to both their colonial masters and to the patriarchal nature of their own societies. For the most part, empire itself was strongly patriarchal, so that women from both colonizing and the colonized groups were marginalized and controlled. However, when approaching post colonial writing it should be kept in mind how different the portrayal of women in different regions, discourses, symbols from different classes and at different times can be. This diversity is important as it emphasizes the distinctive and the individual nature of women's experiences. In this paper we wanted to show that always women are the lost bodies in the conflicts of gender.

Introduction

The novels, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, as a side topic also explore the position of women in a modern African society influenced both by traditional and European values and firmly within the context of colonialism. The importance of gender based approaches to post-colonial literature reflects a growing awareness of the need for women to determine how they are represented and to assert their own histories and cultures. Indeed male writing can be seen as reflecting the values of the patriarchal society to which it belongs. Feminist literary criticism has a particular relevance in a post colonial context. Though both colonialism and patriarchy have been closely entwined historically an end to formal empire has not meant to an end to the oppression of women in the former colonies. On a literary level post colonial feminist point to the ways in which women continue to be stereotyped and marginalized, ironically by post colonial authors who might themselves claim to be challenging a culture of

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oppression. So, gender issues include the theoretical approach, social and ideological approach, psychological approach, discourse, categorized dependency relationship with historical differences, character representation, symbols, double colonization point of view and the visible body. These are what accessible in this composition.

Gender inequality or conflict is the unequal and biased treatment between the two sexes. It is strongly believed that the unequal treatment of women is something that should have stayed in primitive times. Materialistic theories define gender inequality as a result of how men and women are tied to the economic structure of society. They believe that women's role as a mother and wife are devalued by society and deny access to highly respected public opportunities. Lost bodies are the existences that are lost or defeated in the perennial conflict. Therefore the proposition of the topic is to show gender conflict with power play and the ultimate visible power in the texts. So, on the process feminism and colonialism may recurrently show up.

Literature review

Feminism has always been a fascinating topic for African writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Joseph Conrad etc. Piles of literary works are done on this topic. In *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe talks about feminism where he shows women's position in African society. Mezu, another critic remarks that Chinua Achebe's novels "have helped to develop what is known as African literature today" and showed the positive role female in his essay by stating Women constituted the "core of the rural workforce". While criticizing *Heart of Darkness* Gilbert and Gubar point out, 'Kurtz's mistress is a silent hieroglyph in the language strange that articulates both her mysterious history and her threatening hysteria'. In *Feminist Perspective of Heart of Darkness* Marlowe's view of women embodies the typical 19th century view of women as the inferior sex.

Discussion

The position and image of women in *Things Fall Apart* is an important topic. Unfortunately, people have not paid much attention to it beyond going along with the assumption that this novel presents women as a sadly oppressed group with no power. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. That is why it is said that mother is supreme. Women constituted the "core of the rural workforce" (Mezu). In fact, their extensive and strenuous labor makes possible the agrarian society Achebe portrays. As Uchendu tells Okonkwo, a woman has a

life-giving power that is to be revered on some level; this is why *"Mother is Supreme"* (Achebe 94-95) and this mysterious power is also why a woman, Chielo, can be priestess- *"women know the secret of life since they are the source of life"* (Okafor 9-10). Women are time and again thought of as the weaker, more vulnerable of the two sexes. In the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, women are scrutinized as second-class citizens, toothless and defenseless to the authority of men. Women are not respected as man, but as property, laborers, and the producers of children. A woman has no identity of her own; the status and position of her husband defines her. Achebe offers a precise depiction of the role of women in a male-dominated society in *Things Fall Apart*. Women are the primary educators of children. Through storytelling and other forms of interactions, they educate and socialize the children, inspiring in them intellectual curiosity about social ethics, relationships, and the human circumstances. The stories the women tell moreover builds up the artistic consciousness of the children, over and above entertaining them. Through their labour, they are an important pillar of the society. An excellent example of powerful women in the Ibo village is found in the role they play in the Ibo religion. The presence of Chielo, the priestess in *Things Fall Apart* is instructive. She is a spiritual leader, whose authority is unquestioned. It can also be run across the male chauvinism in the Okonkwo's obsession to manliness. For a female spirit to possess such an important role in the success of the yam crops is indicative of the actual deep-rooted power of women. When Okonkwo breaks the Peace of Ani, Ezeani proclaims,

"The evil you have one can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" (Achebe 50-52)

Sometimes Uchenda's words reveal that women are viewed as the foundation of the clan and its people. They are the constant that can be relied upon; they are the nurturers and caretakers of the people. These are not insignificant, powerless roles. But again:

"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 45).

Women are bought to become a man's "wife", which shows that they are thought more of as play toys, slaves, or property, rather than companions. Men are the only sex allowed to own land in the villages, which shows the purpose of men to make a profit and support his family. His oppositional values are those of art, in tandem with a playful irony and an amorality that resounds with his relaxed disposition to the world.

In Joseph Conrad's novella, *Heart of Darkness*, the representation of women is extremely limited. Conrad's portrayals are extreme stereotypes meant to depict the entire female gender. Through these extreme stereotypes, Conrad is able to illustrate his themes of darkness and brutality. Joseph Conrad depicts only three main women in his novel: the aunt of Marlow, as well as the mistress and his fiancée. These roles though limited in their descriptions, are meant to represent the commonly perceived (as well as extremely stereotypical) positions of women in society, i.e.: the mother, the whore and the dutiful Lady/virgin. The juxtaposition of the Intended with Kurtz's mistress highlights the traits of the culturally constructed Victorian woman. She has assembled for herself a tomb of darkness, where everything personifies the sterile and lifeless existence of her kind. All of the women in Conrad's novella are depicted in an unthreatening manner, easily dominated and controlled by men. These representations allow the central themes to be illustrated for the author, showing that they are of male phenomenon.

If in the modernist context the discourse is considered then it is very humiliating for women in both the texts. The narrator mentioned that the word for a man who had not taken any titles was "agbala", which means "woman." Again:

'The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent'. (Achebe, 34).

'...it was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders' (Achebe, 62).

To level the accusation as Petersen does that *'the obvious inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe'*, is truly unfair (Kristen 23).

In the deconstructive method, Marlow is not only the narrator of the story, but also a character within the story itself. His comments about women, and his response to the "dead negro" - show him as a typical Englishman capable of insensitive jokes. Secondly, he uses an overt male language.

The mind of man is capable of anything - because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? Joy, fear, sorrow, devotion, valour, rage - who can tell? - but truth - truth stripped of its cloak of time. Let the fool gape and shudder - the man knows, and can look on without a wink. He must meet that truth with his own stuff - with his own inborn strength (Conrad 51).

Here, Marlow is not only universalizing a relative concept like truth, but also making it an all-male meta-narrative which only men can comprehend because of

their vast intellectual capacity: and thus, he is excluding women from the realm of wisdom without a second thought. But his assertion that male speech "*cannot be silenced*," al-ready implies the ironic displacement within itself. Is there, then, a possibility of silencing it? It seems so, since the male voice feels threatened by this possibility, and resists this displacement. This masculine language connects itself with the masculine value system, in other words, with the culture and ideology of Western societies which place it in a complex interrelationship to the patriarchal and imperialist ideologies.

The contrast between Kurtz's Intended and his Mistress reveals to the contemporary reader this undeniable Victorian provenance - women are effectively marginalized from power and silenced by the text's endorsement of British values. The figure of the African woman in *Heart of Darkness*, inasmuch as she functions as a silent hieroglyph, can be reduced neither to a one-dimensional other, nor understood and hence assimilated into Marlow's world-view in the way Barthes has outlined. Furthermore, by depicting the native woman as speechless, Conrad places her at the center of issues of colonialism. Frantz Fanon, in a somewhat different yet related context argued, "*I ascribe a basic importance to the phenomenon of language...one of the elements in the man of color's comprehension of the dimension of the other*". For it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other". France Fanon argues further that Existence is language, and language is always a matter of politics ("*Black Skins*", 18). Thus, existence is a product of language and the colonized subject must learn the master's language in order to be human. By portraying the woman as mute, Conrad makes her less than human and powerless to engage in a dialogue with her master, Kurtz, except through her sexual power. So on the one hand, as representative of the native people, she possesses animal instincts and is incapable of being civilized. Also in case of the representations both the texts play games and ironies.

guardians of the door of darkness" usher the men into another world altogether - that of the uncivilized jungle (Conrad 8).

The passage that we are about to quote exhibits the text's divided attitudes toward female power: on the one hand, Conrad/Marlow fears the savage woman's sexual mystery, on the other hand he admires and is fascinated by it. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, '*she is a silent hieroglyph in the language strange that articulates both her mysterious history and her threatening hysteria*'. Her presence suggests another silence in the text, the taboo which Conrad never addresses openly, namely her sexual liaison with Kurtz. Ironically, the text reveals Conrad's African version of womanhood and sexuality as real and potent while the Intended is a pure Victorian fantasy, a tradition of the English novel which includes such stereotypes of the fair, insipid heroine, as Amelia in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, a tradition which

Conrad inherited. In a recent study of *Vanity Fair*, Suvendrini Perera uses the term oriental misogyny to describe the representation of gender relations in the English novel:

she was superb...wild eyed and magnificent and like the wilderness itself (Conrad 56)

She symbolizes dynamic energy. For closely linked to this issue of female power is the power of language versus the power of silence. In this passage we see that the power to describe is one exercised through language by Marlow. Yet, in the final analysis, the silent gaze of the 'savage' woman is more articulate and powerful than Marlow's words. But through different images Conrad shows that men are dominating. The sea is a man's world where he goes through trials and initiations that test his manhood, and why? Is there an obsession in the past history and today with manliness and manpower? The final irony in the novel may be that Kurtz last cry is her name and a desperate pronouncement in the spuriousness of one-sided idealism:

The last word he pronounced was your name (Conrad 178)

The initial quarrel between Earth and Sky reflects *Things Fall Apart*'s basic conflict: The struggle between masculine and feminine powers and principles for the Earth is the Goddess Ani, the source of all fertility and the sky is the God. Okonkwo is consistently associated with masculinity and opposes femininity. Christianity embodies the qualities that Okonkwo considers womanish-love mercy, affection etc. Like Nietzsche Achebe seems to consider the warrior culture healthy and he a healthy pagan master morality overcome by Christianity and believes Christianity levels everybody down. As Audre Lorde says:

Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of oppressors....

Findings

These male-centered writing has created the conventions by which all our literary thinking has been conditioned. But, it is powerfully challenged and re-adjusted by feminist literary criticism. Postmodern texts displace the centre of authority and origin in texts, and they question the very premises these origins are based on. Hazel Carby advocates that black feminist criticism should be critically regarded as a problem not a solution. The histories of both colonized and colonizer are written in the male point of view- women are peripheral if they appear at all. Colonial custom and practice stemmed from a world view which believes in the absolute

superiority of the human over the non-human and the subhuman...the masculine over the feminine. One major thesis that emerged from this is that African women suffered from 'double colonization': one from the European domination and the other from the indigenous tradition imposed by the African men. For females, colonization was a two folds process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. Women often gas had multiple identities and it was one of the social motive to categorize women.

Conclusion

According to the schema of Darwinism man has not been created specially or separately from other animals-nor has women. It is the socio cultural phenomenon that has created 'survival'. The twin specters of degeneration and apocalypse haunted the final years of the 19th century. One of the main objects of this is to examine the complex discursive conjunctions of gender and their relationship to the social apocalypse. The coupling of post colonial with woman, however, almost inevitably leads to the simplicities that underlie unthinking celebrations of oppressions, elevating racially the female voice into a metaphor for the 'good' Such metaphoricity cannot be exactly called essentialist but it certainly functions as an impediment to a reading that attempts to look beyond questions of good and evil. So, women in *Things Fall Apart* are insulted and oppressed, but their contribution to farm and family is at least in places acknowledged. Women in *Heart of Darkness*, on the other hand, are isolated and protected; White women, that is. Black women in *Heart of Darkness* are depicted as more like Achebe's Ibo women of *Things Fall Apart* than like their European counterparts. But the ultimate proposition is that in both the texts females are the lost bodies in the conflicts of Gender.

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