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## The Female Gender Construct in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*.

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### **Abstract**

*This work attempts to investigate the female gender construct in two Nigerian novels namely, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958) and Flora Nwapa's Efuru (1966). Using the liberal feministic approach espoused by Millicent Garrett Fawcett as its theoretical framework, the work discusses and analyzes the two texts as data and further seeks to provide answers to such questions as: how do Achebe and Nwapa construct the female gender and what informs their position in the novels under study; and what are the implications of the positions of the two writers for social harmony and societal development. The study suggests that whereas Achebe, writing from a male perspective, stereotypes the female gender as individuals without a voice of their own in the society; a subaltern group of sort, this portrait of the female folk is roundly rejected by Nwapa who, telling the woman's story, re-creates, re-defines and reconstructs the battered image of the female gender by imbuing them with capacity and ability to be responsible individuals who initiate desirable change and contribute meaningfully to the development of their society through collaboration and complementarity with their male counterparts. Hence, Nwapa presents a level-playing ground for the female gender to operate and further provides us with insights to understanding the capacity and ability of the female gender to act and contribute positively to the development and growth of her society instead of being considered as a mere appendage of the male folk as depicted in Achebe's work under study.*

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**Keywords:** Gender, Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, Flora Nwapa, Efuru.

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### **Introduction:**

Sex, biologically considers human beings and classifies them into two broad social categories namely, male and female. Gender, on the other hand attaches cultural roles in this classification of individual persons (human beings) into sexual categories. The difference between the male and the female is, first, based on biological characteristics and attributes of the two sexes. However, the centrality of the biological or physical factors has been roundly contested by some scholars. Ezeigbo (1999) suggests that "gender is constructed along psychological, cultural and social lines" (25). In her book, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1952) suggests that women are constructed by men as passive inconsequential objects. The above situation, Ezeigbo (1999) further re-iterates, "has resulted in the perpetuation of female self-effacement and self-erasure which have insidiously demeaned womanhood for a long time" (26). Kolawole (1998) further observes that with male writers in Nigeria, "women are presented as tragic heroines unable to speak from their subaltern

position” (228). With human society being dominated by men who make the rules, the situation leads to the production of macho values which stifle women’s portraiture as positive contributors to societal development.

Feminist studies are especially characterized by the subversion of biological determinism and the privileging of social factors. Thus, gender theories trace the varied identities of women to psychological, historical and cultural factors prevalent in the society. Gender therefore becomes the social identity of the individual due to one’s sexual category and therefore constitutes a challenge in a society dominated by patriarchy.

Nigerian male writers generally exist as the mouthpiece of their society. The way they project their female characters reflects the disdainful, indifferent or at times cruel manners in which women are regarded in the Nigerian society. Ebele Eko (1986) remarks that “these writers invariably cast all women in the strict sexist roles of mothers, submissive to the norms, regulations that restrict them” (211).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The work adopts the liberal feministic approach as espoused by Millicent Garrett Fawcett. The object of liberal feminism is to point to, and reclaim the rights and position of the female in the society and to make her relevant in the scheme of things as initiators of action and strategies and not as mere passive individuals.

Fawcett subscribes to the position that the goal of feminism is to give every woman the opportunity of becoming the best that her natural faculties make her capable of. She is, further, of the view that the woman’s denial of capacity to develop within the available space is hinged upon the idea which considers the women as inferior within a patriarchal system that negates women. These shackles must therefore be confronted and dismantled to imbue the women with capacity and ability to operate within the available space. The liberal feministic approach becomes relevant to the study as it subscribes to the idea of “accommodationism” and “complementarity” as against the radical feministic approach which advocates separatism along gender lines.

### **Presentation and Discussion of Data**

The data adopted for discussion and analysis in this study are drawn from Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. These works portray the female gender in diametrically opposite directions. Understandably, both writers are of opposite gender as well as cultural backgrounds. Achebe’s homeland of Ogidi is anchored on the goddess “Idemili” which he masculinizes by making the goddess wrap a loincloth, in the fashion of men. On the other hand, in Nwapa’s homeland of Oguta, the woman is expected to fulfill herself in economic independence, intellect and social service like “Uhanmiri”, the divinity of Oguta. The woman is therefore never denied her personal fulfillment. The above situation, perhaps, underscores Achebe’s portrayal of the female gender in *Things Fall Apart* in the negative light while Nwapa reconstructs this negative imputation on the female gender in *Efuru* by an objective representation of the female protagonist thereby making the woman relevant in the scheme of things in the society.

Until the publication of Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966), the portraiture of the female by male writers was one restricted to some kind of idealization, rigid conventionality, stereotyping and a superficiality that was left to be desired. Essentially, women were considered as peripheral, in fact, male appendages without any capacity for anything socially meaningful. Analyzing the image of the Nigerian woman in the works of Achebe, Ekwensi and Amadi, Charles Nnolim notes that women are largely stereotyped as “helpless, dependent, brutalized, disparaged prostitutes or concubines or good time girls” (1998:59). The depiction of female characters in such novels as Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana* in *Jagua Nana* (1961), Elechi Amadi’s *Ihuoma*

in *The Concubine* (1961), and Chinua Achebe's *Ekwefi* in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) have all been considered as very negative.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents us with a traditional society in which women are generally a subaltern group in the margin of society, docile and accepting the multiple levels of subjugation with utmost grace. This is shown in the female characters, especially the wives of Okonkwo. Conversely, we notice the image of Okonkwo immediately he is introduced to the reader from the very beginning:

He was tall and huge and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily and it was said that when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody (3,).

The above "wonderful" and awe-inspiring image of the central character, Okonkwo permeates the novel under study. This accounts for why "his wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear.., and so did the little children" (9). Okonkwo is seen a great man, and he demonstrates it from the great yam barns he always had, and the courageous actions he takes. It is in demonstration of this courage that Okonkwo beheads the white man's messenger. This action is committed because, in the logic of his philosophy, manliness in the eyes of the people also includes demonstrating great force, the lack of which would be similar to womanhood. Okonkwo never allows himself to be mistaken for a woman, and he makes no mistake about it as he declares:

Let's not reason like cowards, said Okonkwo. If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are pouring filth over us and Okeke pretends not to see. Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. "This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland (113).

Okonkwo's society in the novel is a patriarchal one; that is why men dominate it. His radicalism is equally displayed at all levels, even towards his wives and children. In the novel; we notice Okonkwo's disposition towards his wives, as he could, for any trifle offence, beat up any of them. And we are informed that he:

Ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, Ugoye, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children (9).

Because, for him,

No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his woman) he was not really a man. He was like a man in the song who had ten and one wives and not enough soup for his foo-foo (37).

From the foregoing, Achebe's male characters are presented as very important individuals. In demonstrating how distinct gender differentiation suggests the marginalization of women in the novel, Achebe informs the reader of the six titled men who get imprisoned after the destruction of the church by the villagers, and who finally regain their liberation only after the villagers have paid a fine:

As they made their way to the village, the six men met women and children going to the stream with their water pots. But the men wore such heavy and fearsome looks that the women and the children did not say "nno" or welcome to them, but edged out of the way to let them pass. In the village, little groups of men joined them until they became a sizeable company (140).

Furthermore, we observe in the novel that the female gender is not given the identity

that is desirable. Otherwise, how does one explain the fact that the mother of Okonkwo, that is Unoka's wife, does not have a name by which she is identified in the text? Similarly, we notice that the first wife of Okonkwo is simply referred to as "Nwoye's mother". The above scenario therefore suggests the female gender as being constructed to show their lack of identity in the traditional society. On another note, Ekwefi, the second wife of Okonkwo is represented in the novel as a cheap and unconscionable woman who absconds from her husband for no justifiable reason only to throw herself, uninvited, on Okonkwo, apparently because of the latter's fame and achievement. As we are informed regarding Ekwefi:

She had married Anene because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry... She was going to the stream to fetch water. Okonkwo's house was on the way to the stream. She went in and knocked at his door and he came out... He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth (109).

From the foregoing, we observe that the female gender, represented in the person of Ekwefi, is constructed as a "fair-weather" person lacking in conscience; a lewd creature of sorts. Finally, one is inclined to posit that, in the novel, Achebe lumps women together with children, as stereotypes in the nature of very passive, good-for-nothing, unimportant creatures who contribute nothing so significant to the process of societal or national development.

In her ground-breaking novel, *Efuru* (1966), Flora Nwapa sets the stage by identifying the need for women to be the voice, the conscience, and the centre of consciousness of the female gender instead of waiting for some misogynist to do same for them, an expectation that may never see the light of day. Nwapa obviously adopts a self-repossession strategy culminating into a consciousness rising. She attempts to interrogate and also subvert the demeaning myths usually spun by the patriarchal society, concerning women.

Omolara Ogundipe-Leshie (1994) notes that the woman writer has two responsibilities: "first, to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective". Thus, Nigerian female writers generally, address such issues as the status of girls at birth, the plight of widows, early marriages, single parenthood and so on. Flora Nwapa's creative forays, it must be emphasized here, have been informed by the realization that it behoves on women to reconstruct the woman by recreating her image in fiction. Nwapa's fiction is therefore a cry against the disparaged and degraded portraiture of the female in Nigerian literature. This courageous and positive reaction aims to reconstruct the female gender image in contemporary Nigerian fiction and consequently represent the woman in the light of present-day realities, not as a "thing" but as "somebody" with all capacities, who contributes to the growth and harmony of society.

Against the foregoing therefore, Flora Nwapa, through the female protagonist, *Efuru*, in the novel, creates a socially healthier and decent society that is respectful of its women. She openly interrogates the issues of gender and the distribution of power by the patriarchal society. The female characters are equally moved from their plebian, innocent and helpless position to a state of self-empowerment and authority. They accept and appreciate themselves not only as women, but "new woman" different from the usual stereotypes with negative images that the reader is quite familiar with, especially in male-authored Nigerian novels. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* presents the story of the eponymous heroine, *Efuru*; a very strong woman, resilient, beautiful and morally faultless. In describing this remarkable woman of virtue, Nwapa consciously subverts the stereotypical portrayal of women by most male writers. *Efuru*, therefore remains Nwapa's own inscription of the feminine principle (liberal feminism) in Nigerian and, by extension, African literature. She expresses the need to recast and re-define the gender realities and eschew women's self-hatred and male subjugation (radical feminism) in order to engender a gender-balance.

In Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) as in her other novels namely, *Never Again* (1975), *One is*

Enough (1981), and *Women Are Different* (1986), it is not the male but, rather, the female character who dominates the plot and occupies the centre stage in the narrative hence the reconstruction of the female gender concept in Nigerian literature. As indicated by Azodo (1998), “Flora Nwapa’s description of Efuru seems to be a reaction against what can be considered as the relegation of women to the background” (162). In the novel, we are duly informed of the status of Efuru as one as high as that of the man of achievement in Achebe’s novel. About Efuru, the central female character, it is said:

Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It was not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself (1).

Nwapa tries to re-define the female gender by creating female characters that tower above others, and even above their husbands (the male folks) and hence reflect the changing realities of the African women.

Furthermore, the female character, Efuru is presented in the novel as beautiful, resourceful, commanding, intelligent, sensitive, affecting subtly men in spite of themselves. This portrayal of the female gender by Nwapa is diametrically opposite to that of Achebe in the text under study. Although Efuru does not dislike men, she nevertheless acts responsibly, maintaining her self-pride, and also strives for financial independence through a career in business. Efuru, the eponymous female character has all good qualities and her strong individuality permeates the entire novel. She is courageous and never docile; she confronts the challenges of her existence in a society full of gender constraints, and achieves tremendous success; thereby, a happy woman and not one with forlorn hope or expectation. She takes centre-stage in the entire story and celebrates her femininity in all spheres of her life. We are further informed in the novel regarding the charm which Efuru exudes and which engenders her immense success in business:

I heard so much about her... Her hands make money. Anything she touches is money. If she begins to sell pepper in the market, she will make money out of it. If in salt, money will flow in (156).

### **Conclusion, Significance of study to Scholarship, and Contribution to knowledge**

The work has attempted to investigate the female gender construct in two Nigerian, and by extension African novels namely, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966). We are able to understand the female gender construct by appreciating the authors’ presentations of the major female characters in the two works under study namely, Unoka’s wife (Okonkwo’s mother), Nwoye’s mother (Okonkwo’s first wife), Ugoye (Okonkwo’s second wife) and Ekwefi, the first two characters in the above list not having been identified by name in *Things Fall Apart*, and the eponymous heroine, *Efuru*, in Nwapa’s *Efuru*. It is submitted that the female gender is stereotyped in Achebe’s work as passive, subaltern group of sort whose existence is predicated on the pleasure of the male folk. This construct is antithetical to the aspirations and development of the female folk. However, Nwapa strives to, and successfully re-constructs, re-defines, and re-presents the hitherto disparaged image of the female gender in *Efuru*, and this is materialized in the many descriptions of the eponymous heroine, Efuru. By doing so, Nwapa presents the female gender with a level-playing ground to operate. She further leaves us with an understanding of the capacity and ability of the female gender to act and contribute positively to societal development and sustenance, rather than being seen as mere appendage of the male folk, passive ones, and “things”; a position depicted in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*.

Finally, the significance of this work is underscored by the fact that it re-ifies our understanding of how a writer’s cultural background and social milieu affect or shape a literary text. It is obvious that both Achebe and Nwapa have been affected by their respective societal and cultural values as they relate to the treatment of gender relations. Whereas



Achebe's Ogidi society exhibits male gender chauvinism; denigrating the female folk, Nwapa's Oguta society, it does appear undoubtedly, exhibits a gender-neutral and accommodationist disposition, in tandem with the Igbo philosophy of 'let the eagle perch, let the kite perch, that which will not allow the other perch, let its wing break'; an idea which engenders social tolerance, development and growth. Achebe tells his story from a solidly male perspective. Notwithstanding, the woman's story has to be told too, by a woman, and Flora Nwapa accomplishes this task in *Efuru*.

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