

Gender Issues in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

A huge part of Okonkwo's love for his daughter Ezinma is rooted in his belief that she sees, understands, accepts, and, in many ways, emulates him. No other person in the community or even his family for that matter connects with Okonkwo on the same fundamental level. This is due, at least in part, to Okonkwo's hidden, all-consuming fear of becoming anything like his ne'er-do-well father, a skilled musician more interested in playing his flute, drinking gourds of palm-wine, partying with neighbors, and shamelessly amassing bad debts than he is in providing for his family or securing an honorable reputation within the Umuofia tribe. "[Okonkwo's] whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. ... It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. ... Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved" (13). His determination not to be anything like his *agbala* father means he spends a considerable amount of time and energy proving his strength and masculinity. Outwardly, he is a celebrated wrestler, a decorated warrior, a high-ranking clansman, a wealthy cropper capable of caring for three wives, etc. And that show of masculinity is unwavering. Behind closed doors, he rules "his household with a heavy hand. [And] his wives, especially the youngest, [lives] in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so [do] his little children" (13). Out in the community he is exceedingly principled and law abiding, so much so that when the tribe decides that Ikemefuna, who becomes like an adopted son to him and whom he grows to love, must die, he takes part in the killing, despite his misgivings. Likewise, when Okonkwo accidentally shoots and kills Ezedu's 16-year-old son, the former takes his seven-year exile to Mbanta on the chin. Both underscore the fact that Okonkwo's thoughts, emotions, and actions are often incongruent. Consequently, no one knows that his strength, masculinity, and success are catalyzed by intense fear. Even though it is a

misconception of his own making, Okonkwo is fundamentally misunderstood—by everyone except Ezinma. “Of all his children she alone understood his every mood. A bond of sympathy had grown between them as the years had passed” (172). I would argue that Okonkwo love and respect Ezinma is rooted in her masculinity. There are a number of instances throughout the novel where she exhibits manly behavior and where Okonkwo openly confesses to wishing she had been born a boy. For instance, after Ikemefuna’s death, Okonkwo, riddled with guilt, descends into a state of despair, forgoing food in favor of drowning his sorrows in a steady flood of palm-wine. He instructs his son Nwoye to sit with him. “But the boy was afraid of him and slipped out of the hut” (63). Ezinma, on the other hand, not only brazenly brings her father food, but also demands he eats it and then sits across from him to ensure he complies:

“You have not eaten for two days,” said his daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. “So you must finish this.” She sat down and stretched her legs in front of her.

Okonkwo ate the food absent-mindedly. ‘She should have been born a boy,’ he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter. (63-64)

Okonkwo respects the forwardness and self-assuredness Ezinma exhibits from a young age. They are character traits his own sons lack, which is, perhaps, why he so laments the fact that Ezinma isn’t born a boy.

In Igbo society, women, in general, are treated more like property to barter and sell than they are like valued and respected human beings. In fact, the law of the land overtly placed a higher value on a man’s life than a woman’s. We learn this when Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezedu’s son. “It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent” (124). The women in the tribe, then,

are one another's sole allies, a fact that makes it all the more important for them to stick together. Okonkwo's first wife exhibits this sort of dutiful allegiance to her sister-wife—Okonkwo's youngest wife—Ojiugo, when she doesn't return home in time from getting her hair plaited to prepare and serve her husband his afternoon meal. When he questions his first and second wives about Ojiugo's whereabouts, his first wife outright lies to Okonkwo, claiming that Ojiugo asked her to watch after and feed her children. She does so in hopes of "minimizing Ojiugo's thoughtlessness" (29) and lessening the severity of the punishment waiting for her when she returns home. Though this is not necessarily an instance of actual bonding, I think it's a powerful exhibition of female camaraderie in an oppressively male-dominated culture.

One beautiful female bond that I admired in the novel is the relationship between Ekwefi and Ezinma. Mother and daughter are exceptionally close, because Ezinma is Ekwefi's only surviving child. Described as the center of her mother's world, "the relationship between them was not only that of mother and child. There was something in it like the companionship of equals..." (76-77). This is evidenced by the fact that Ezinma calls her mother by her first name. Likewise, Ekwefi spoils her daughter with eggs, something considered a delicacy that children, as a rule of thumb, are rarely permitted to eat because it tempts them to steal. Even after Okonkwo catches Ezinma eating eggs and threatens to beat his wife if she ever dares to give their daughter eggs again, Ekwefi finds it "impossible to refuse Ezinma anything" (76) and continues her "little conspiracy" of allowing her to eat eggs in secret in the bedroom, behind closed doors. Such instances of true affection and adoration are especially important considering how reticent Okonkwo is when it comes to expressing his love or emotions and how undervalued women are within the Igbo culture.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor, 1994.