

GENDER DIFFERENTIALS IN IGBO SOCIETY: THE CASE OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

Gender differentials is a common phenomena in African Society. In this paper we have tried to examine the levels of gender differentials in both the traditional Igbo society and in the contemporary Igbo society. In the analysis that follow shows that we had a higher level of differentials in the traditional setting than we now have in this contemporary period. The reason is that the irrational approach to the gender question is fast obliterating the differentiation that should exist between the male and the female. By gender differentials , we mean the level of awareness, appreciation of the need to maintain at reasonable levels the gender sensitivity between the male and female. It is true to some extent that what a man can do, the woman can equally do, but it is not expedient that women should insist on doing everything the man does even at the expense of nature's assigned honorific roles of wifehood and motherhood. At the same time we stress that all the rustic are atavistic male chauvinistic character of domination, oppression and marginalization must be done away with. Other wise, when gender differentiations are completely obliterated, gender sensitivity will also disappear with it. This will lead to some un-naturalness. To remain gender sensitive, we have to keep the gender peculiarities in focus to a reasonable limit.

INTRODUCTION

Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household...and so he (Okonkwo) was happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man. (Achebe 37).

The above provides us a glimpse of the African traditional gender stereotype. The boy is brought up to see himself as superior to the girls. A boy's father did everything from

scolding to severe beating to ensure that he removes any trace of womanish trait from his son. The above captures Okonkwo's joy at seeing that his first son Nwoye has begun to shed his childhood feminine tendencies. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* paints a vivid picture of the Igbo traditional gender stereotypes, a miniature of Africa and how through informal education fathers groom their boys to grow up as men, bold, courageous, audacious and fearless. The women on the other hand groom the girls to become soft, subservient, weak and gentle. This was why Okonkwo declared "*I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan*" (24).

The silent but rigorous schooling into the patriarchal and matriarchal stereotypes was ingrained in the traditional institution of the Igbo. The men knew what was expected of them, and so did the women.

The men and the women seemed to have accepted their gender roles as a *fait accompli*. Men and women were sensitized and indoctrinated in such a way that there were no conflicts or bad blood. Gender sensitivity was very high in Igbo land. In virtually all spheres of life, boys and girls, men and women knew what was expected of them. In the family, women swept the house, washed the plates, cooked the food, etc., while the boys or the men split the firewood, pounded the yam foofoo and climbed the palm trees. In farming, the women planted maize, melons and beans between the yam mounds while the men made the yam mounds and planted yams. As Achebe portrayed it "yam stood for manliness" and yam was regarded as the king of crops.

Another image carved out for the women folk in Igbo traditional society is that of the enjoyer of the wealth of the men. Women are called "Oriaku", that is, those who enjoy the wealth of their husbands. We have therefore two pictures that look seemingly opposed to each other – namely that of servitude and merriment. This picture though appears paradoxical is more real than fake. It is in these ironies that one appreciates the woof, waft and texture of the Igbo traditional culture with the attendant pains and glories.

In this paper we wish to examine the extent of gender sensitivity in traditional Igbo culture with the view of trying to underscore their acceptability or otherwise in the present contemporary setting.

GENDER-SENSITIVITY IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SOCIETY

A reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* provides us with the portraiture of the traditional Igbo family with its genderized roles and functions.

In the family, if a child is born, the sex is determined and if the baby was a male, that meant greater joy for the parents. For the man, joy, because he has a man who will take his place after his death and continue with his family line. Joy for the mother because that will properly entrench her in her husband's heart. Having a son means for her that

nothing can uproot her from the family. A son further means having a voice to defend you in the family. But if the child is a girl, the husband and wife receive it with mixed feelings. And if female child is coming as the third, fourth, fifth or sixth female in the family without a male child that is enough reason for sorrow. For the man, it brings sorrow because his hope of having a male child to continue his lineage is becoming slimmer, the females will soon be married off to other men. Having female children is like “tending other people’s vineyards while your own is unkempt”.

As the children begin to grow, the males and the females are socialized differently. The boys are made to see themselves as superior, stronger, more important and indispensable. The females are trained to see themselves as appendages of the men. In *Things Fall Apart*, we see Okonkwo telling Nwoye and Ikemefuna masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. These stories are told so as to toughen them and prepare them for their future roles as the protector, guardian and head of their families. On the other hand, the mothers told their daughters feminine stories about how to behave themselves so as to attract worthy husbands and how to serve their husbands in order to win their hearts. Achebe goes on;

Nwoye somehow still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell... stories of tortoise and his wily ways... But he knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women’s stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased and no longer rebuked him or beat him (38).

The gender roles were in some cases so cut out that the males getting into the areas meant for the females and vice versa was regarded as abomination (nso ani). For example, it is abomination for a girl to go and handle her father’s dane gun. The boy can do that. Again, it is unacceptable for the boy to hang around the kitchen when the women are cooking and cracking jokes that touched on female genitals, puberty rites and the like.

The boy’s duty ranges from washing his fathers clothing, taking care of the flock (of sheep, goat, etc), getting the yam seedlings ready, getting the knives sharpened, the hoes and other farming implements ready for farm work. He leads in the way to the farm lands, he protects the girls, he ensures that the difficult tasks are done by him and so on. He gets involved in age grade, secret societies, masquerades, wrestling matches, meetings, accompanies his father to ceremonies (funeral, title taking, marriages, etc.) as the father will demand. He continues and begins to learn how to establish himself as a

farmer, a shepherd or take after some other trade. But in the traditional Igbo society farming was the mainstay of the economy. It is one's ability to have his barns filled with yams that marked him out as a prosperous man. The man could do a range of things, his movements were not restricted, he could try his hands in different occupations at any time. But the story of the women or the females is somewhat restricted. She is from the word go made to know that her world begins and ends with getting married, getting children and serving the meal-needs of her husband with the kitchen as the headquarters of her functions.

As Achufusi has portrayed it, females are specifically engaged in sex-oriented functions as marriage, child bearing and rearing. They accept the societal prescriptions for and conceptions that wife-hood and then motherhood constitute the only avenues open to them of deserving respect or of earning prestige in the society (159). He further avers that the above portraiture is the order because of the patriarchal orientation of Igbo society within which the woman operates, and which limits and confines her right to alternate choices. This makes the image of the woman in the Igbo traditional society to appear to lack lustre, excitement and impressiveness. The narrowness of her operational sphere is said to be responsible for this lack lustre image of the women (159).

Chinweizu thinks otherwise. In his *Anatomy of Female Power*, he mentions five pillars of female power which women have always manipulated to lord it over men. These five pillars are namely, women's control of the womb, women's control of the kitchen, women's control of the cradle, the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman and man's tendency to be deranged by his own excited penis (14-15). He claims that these five pillars of female power are decisive. For him, male dominance over the female is more apparent than real, more cosmetic and superficial. Women from the traditional societies have always exploited these weapons for their overall advantages. This appears to be a male riposte targeted to nullify the women's cry of marginalization and dominance.

Be that as it may be, we must mention that in the traditional society, human activities were limited and as such the division of functions on gender basis did not attract any disillusionment or dissatisfaction. The men and the women accepted the traditional stereotypes without question. And one could say that the traditional Igbo society over protected the women, one could not divorce at will or beat his wife any how nor shoot at women. The umu-ada (women's) age grade were very powerful in protecting the women from the excesses of their husbands.

However, the above notwithstanding, there were some anachronisms and rustic prescriptions which went contrary to the fundamental human rights of women in

traditional society. For instance, the woman was seen as incapable of reasoning for herself. Achufusi; captures this problem in the following words.

The most pathetic thing about these women is their ineffectiveness as human beings, incapability to correct or admonish their husbands despite their knowledge of the inadequacies in the men's lives they are all aware of the superficiality, vanity, avarice, emptiness and extreme flamboyance of the kind of life their husbands lead and into which they (the wives) have been pulled. They all appear helpless, unable to break away and start a more purposeful life for themselves or make effort to bring sanity and reality into the lives of their husbands (162).

The wives of Okonkwo, for instance, knew after he killed Ikemefuna that the man had gone off the moral and spiritual tangent but there was nothing the wives could do to call him to order because of the “untouchable image portraiture” of the husband in the traditional Igbo society. Today, things have changed. The Igbo have become one of the most sophisticated tribes in the present Nigerian nation. They are profoundly educated widely traveled economically advanced socially advanced and psychologically active. Ndiokwere avers that the Igbo traditional identity is fast being eroded as many Igbo leave their country for other places in search of Greener pastures.

He says;

The primary aim of search for Greener Pastures has been to alert Nigerians, Africans, Ndi Igbo, and black people in Diaspora about the devastating consequences of the mass exodus of Africans from mother Africa to other parts of the world particularly Europe and America (9).

The point I want to make is that the world has become a global village and the Igbo cannot remain aloof from these contemporary developments and their impact on our traditional systems. In the traditional Igbo system, the Igbo were sensitive to the female gender much more than today, this leads us to consider;

GENDER SENSITIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY

Gone were the days when women were regarded only as “Oriaku” or a consumer of husbands’ wealth, today, she is seen as “Oriaku”, “Odozi aku” and “Okpata aku”, that is, consumer of wealth, keeper and moderator of wealth and a maker of wealth respectively. Times have changed, values have changed and expectations have changed in the face of economic hardship, breakdown of traditional moral norms, infiltration of norms of other cultures and the general enlargement of scope of roles and functions for men and women. The reasons why people married many wives in traditional Igbo society no longer obtain. We hardly have Igbo farmers who depend on large family to execute their farm work. We have formal education which has opened the eyes of the women to fight for their freedom. For example, Gerda Lerner records about Christine de Pizan whom she said pioneered female education in Europe. She was bitter that her parents denied her good education. She makes her point thus if it were customary to send daughters to school like sons, and “if they were taught the natural sciences, they would learn as thoroughly and understand the subtleties of all the arts and science as well as men” (193) she advocated equality of education for boys and girls (men and women). Other women like Schurman, Marie le Jars de Gournay distinguished themselves in scholarly achievements (Gerda Lerner 196). This fire for women education soon spread every where including Nigeria and the Igbo women were not left. There is virtually no academic profession where we do not have Igbo women excelling.

The Igbo women are competing with their male counterparts in searching for Greener Pastures in Europe and America. They are graduating as Lawyers, Doctors, Engineers, Nurses, Pharmacists, Lecturers, Economists and many are in the business professions.

It is therefore difficult if not impossible to tie any Igbo woman down against her will to serve as a full time house wife. The hurricane of women liberation is sweeping through the Igbo populace and the slogan seem to be that what a male Igbo can do a female Igbo can do better.

The sad part of it is that Igbo men come back home, marry an Igbo lady, take her to Europe or America and as soon as her eyes opens, she begins to seek independence through divorce on very flimsy grounds. This is leading to a warped up and bizarre situation.

When women were under the men, we had fewer problems but today the excessive quest for liberty is turning every thing upside down. It is therefore important to mention that there is need for a philosophical reappraisal of gender sensitivity in Igbo culture. The general attitude today is for people to run to the Pentecostal churches to look for wives who will still maintain the institutional worth of womanhood, that will not desecrate womanhood on the alter of women liberation.

IDEOLOGICAL DECLINE IN GENDER DIFFERENTIALS IN CONTEMPORARY IGBO SOCIETY

If by gender-differentials we mean being particular about the peculiar roles and functions of male and female we may say that such sensitivity is on the decline. Nobody seems to care. Any person can do anything he or she likes. This appears to conform to the social climate of our age. However, we must state without fear of equivocation that there is need to revisit our gender posturing in order to effect some reevaluations and modifications.

In the traditional Igbo society, women were subservient, subjected to some very dehumanizing treatment. We know what widows passed through; barren women were seen as scums and offscourings of the earth. Women were beaten, harassed and deprived of their rights. In all good sense, all these aspects of the traditional era were condemnable and must be jettisoned completely. Man and woman are created in the image of God and they stand equal before God as human beings. But, then, equality does not mean abdicating God's assigned roles. Today, we hear of surrogate motherhood, we hear of single female parents, lesbianism, etc. These are negative ways of responding to gender inequality.

As Maduabuchi Dukor has noted, the question of gender equality has two facets, one is moral and the other is ontological. The moral consideration should be that every injustice, disability, arising from oppression; marginalization, or outright subjugation of women must be seen as immoral. Ontologically, women must see themselves as beings of some sort, though capable of doing virtually all things that men can do but will willingly impose natural limitations on her liberties in order to still continue to fulfill her God given roles and functions which the man cannot perform. The woman alone can give birth to children, give suck to her children and provide motherly care to her children. If she abandons this function, what will become of our children? Already, children of this present time are fast becoming uncontrollable because of the lapses the present day confused values is engendering.

As Duckor further avers; what the African (Igbo) woman needs is education and enlightenment, it is fundamentally education that will raise the African woman to the level where a retrogressive culture has placed the African man. The African woman would not be liberated by destroying the culture, by making the woman richer or urbanized and deruralized or by breaking homes. (190).

Education will raise the consciousness of the women and equip them with the tools for wisely repudiating the negative overbearing tendencies of the men. To do this successfully, women must bear in mind the biblical counsel that "Every wise woman buildeth her house but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands" (Proverbs 14:1). God

has made the man as the head for administrative purposes and not to lord it over her and use her as a mere object of pleasure or menial service. This the men must know as well. The enabling environment should be created to enable the women to aspire to any height without reneging on the sacred duties of wifehood and motherhood. All atavistic and anachronistic limitations of the past must be bade farewell to and so must we do to the cantankerous, disorderly assertiveness of women as seen in the pervasion of all things in our time. Sanity must rule the hearts of men and women as we continue to meaningful dialogue to affect a just social order.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have noted that gender-sensitivity was high in the traditional Igbo society. However, this sensitivity favoured the men and left the women in disadvantage. Today, the picture has changed with less sensitivity but greater liberty for the women but with an image that is presently being battered by women themselves.

We have analyzed the situation and uphold that, there is need for a sane reevaluation of our present day norms. Women should enjoy equality of opportunity in education, career and politics only to the extent that they will not jeopardize their roles as wives and mothers. A lot of thoughtfulness is required for women to carve out the right place for themselves in the socio-political and economic scheme of things. The men must know that men and women are equal before God and should play complementary roles in order to achieve God's best for them. Genderization should not lead to rivalry, unhealthy competition or savage deviation from rational norms guided by equity and good conscience.

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