Gender and Feminism in Pre-colonial and Postcolonial Nigerian Literature: Reading, Achebe, Adichie, and Atta

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Literatures of Modernity

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Abstract

For more than a century since British colonization of Nigeria (1914-1960), the voices of Nigerian women have largely been silent, both in Nigerian literature and in society. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which is widely regarded as one of the literary works that ushered in modern Nigerian writing, provides evidence of the existence and types of patriarchal structures in pre-colonial contact Nigeria that silenced women. Achebe’s novel has influenced an entire generation of late twentieth century and twenty-first century Nigerian authors whose writings engage with female silence/silencing, and with Nigerian women’s resistance to that silencing, in the postcolonial period. This silence/silencing is a consequence of anti-woman norms embedded in both local Nigerian customs and traditions and in beliefs and practices held over from colonial times.

In this paper, two of these contemporary Nigerian works—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) are compared with *Things Fall Apart*. Adichie’s and Atta’s novels are both set in the latter part of the twentieth century; and, when analyzed in tandem with Achebe’s, they offer an exploration of the ways in
which the combination of Nigerian customs and the remnants of British colonial influence impact on Nigerian women’s ability to make themselves heard.

For the analysis of the novels, this paper draws on writings of notable postcolonial and feminist theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as the writings of “Third World” theorists such as Gayatri Spivak to contextualize the discussion of female silence/silencing.
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Introduction

In both pre-colonial and postcolonial Nigeria, in Christian as well as Muslim communities, the voices of Nigerian women have mostly been relegated to the margins of society. Women continue to be excluded from decision-making, both within the private and public spheres. The writings of both twentieth and twenty-first century Nigerian writers bring attention to how Nigerian women are silenced by sexism embedded within Nigerian society. This silencing is evident in Chinua Achebe’s novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), where the main male protagonist, Okonkwo, exerts iron control over the women in his life. Achebe’s novel provides the touchstone for the analysis of notable Nigerian authors’ engagement with women’s lives, gender relationships, gender roles, and gender inequities. It is the seminal literary work on pre-colonial contact Nigeria, specifically and is also generally regarded as one of the works which ushered in modern Nigerian writing. However, Achebe’s is not the only Nigerian novel that draws attention towards gender inequality that is created and reinforced by patriarchal customs and norms in Nigerian society. The writings of contemporary Nigerian women writers such as Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie address the more recent forms that sexism and gender inequality, particularly where they result in silencing women, take in mid to late twentieth-century Nigeria. These more recent forms expose, for example, the biases against women in Nigerian law as regards domestic abuse and rape. Such biases in Nigerian law also dissuades witnesses from testifying against the perpetrators of such crimes, resulting in female victims of rape and abuse being silenced and traumatized by these horrific experiences. Thus, reading *Things Fall Apart* in tandem with works by Adichie and Atta allows for comparing and contrasting the forms that the silencing of women have taken in pre-contact and postcolonial Nigeria.
In “Colonizing Bodies and Minds,” Oyeroke Oyewumi argues that the histories of both the colonized and the colonizer have been written from the male point of view and that the female point of view is peripheral (256). In this paper I focus on the female point of view as represented in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), and Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), whether that point of view is explicitly centred or marginalized. In “Postcolonial Feminist Criticism,” Chris Weedon presents two different definitions of the term, “postcolonial.” He states that the term “postcolonial” both in a feminist and non-feminist usage, signifies differently according to the context in which it is used (285). Weedon states that at times this term is understood in a temporal sense to denote a period which comes after the historically located phenomenon of colonialism, and at other times this term is “often used as a mode of critique upon questioning both the mechanisms of colonial domination and their ongoing effects in the present” (285). In my analysis of the novels, I apply both definitions, although the definitional emphasis depends on the novel under discussion. The first definition is emphasized more in my analysis of Achebe’s novel. Both definitions are given more or less equal weight in my analysis of Atta’s novel, while my analysis of Adichie’s novel suggests that this text approaches both definitions as inextricably linked.

I compare and contrast the degree to which the female perspective is foregrounded across the three novels in terms of the ways in which the narratives address the ramifications for women as regards domestic abuse and violence, rape and sexual assault as well as gender expectations within marriage in nuclear and extended family structures. I examine the patriarchal assumptions inherent within the actions and beliefs of parental figures in Adichie’s novel and Atta’s novel; and following this, I examine the actions and behaviors of the daughters of these parental figures.
in terms of how they overcome their parents’ patriarchal influence. Furthermore, I examine the significance of the decolonizing and anti-patriarchal influences (both of which, as I argue, are related) that assist these daughters in overcoming patriarchal constraints and establishing a newfound space of freedom both for themselves and for other Nigerian women.

**Postcolonial Feminisms: The Key Issues**

In “Replacing Theory: Postcolonial-Writing and Literary Theory,” Bill Ashcroft explores the earliest roots of postcolonialism. He indicates that one of the dangers of analyzing literature from nations formerly colonized by the British is that the postcolonial lens is often co-opted by other critical perspectives like postmodernism (Ashcroft 156). These other critical perspectives attempt to flatten out the significance of the historical and cultural contexts of former colonies, which are important if readers are to better understand the unique differences and specificities vis-à-vis women’s experiences in these localities. Feminist critical theory tends to do the same because of the Western bias of much feminist criticism, resulting in an erasure of the specific concerns, experiences, and responses of non-Western women in literature. Therefore, Ashcroft, following the works of Third-World feminist theorists such as Spivak, and more recent author-critics such as Atta and Adichie argue for a postcolonial feminist critical practice that pays attention to not only the intersections between gender, post/neo/colonial histories, and locality but also to the specific cultural expressions and experience of silencing these contexts.

In “First Things First – Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature,” Kirsten Holst Peterson provides insight into the key differences between Western and African discussions of feminism. In 1980, Peterson attended a conference with feminists from across Africa; and, in that conference, she learned in real time that Western feminists and African feminists have different ideas about the issues that are important to women. From this discovery,
Peterson asked the question: Which comes first for African feminists: the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? (Peterson 235) For the three writers discussed in this paper, both fights are important in narratives that explore the challenges as well as the triumphs of achieving personal and socio-political voice, although each novel gives different degrees of importance to these questions. In Achebe’s novel, gender inequality is presented as an issue in Nigeria that predates colonial contact. In fact, Okonkwo’s abuse of his wife, Oiugo, during the Week of Peace is one of the events that give shape to the novel’s main storyline of the fall of the flawed heroic figure. So, although a large part of Things Fall Apart focuses on the impact of Western cultural imperialism, the novel does address to some degree the issue of female inequality in the local culture (but not in relation to colonialism as in Atta’s and Adichie’s novels) through the depiction of its male protagonist whose mistreatment of women is presented as a character flaw and as a significant contributing factor to his downfall. For its part, Atta’s novel engages with the aftermaths of British colonization as her narrative is set in post-independence Nigeria. In particular, her novel engages with the aftereffects of colonialism as regards its impact on the religious divide between Nigerians who embrace different faith systems such as Christianity and Islam; and Atta’s narrative also gives significant attention to women’s experience with silence and marginalization within this context. This is noticeable, for example, in those moments in the novel where Enitan reflects on the differences between her religion (Christianity) and experience and that of her friend (Islam) Sheri.

Although female rights have evolved in Nigeria between the settings of Achebe’s and Atta’s novel, female inequality remains an issue as, for example, in legal bias against women in cases of sexual assault. Thus, whereas the question of Western cultural imperialism is more evident than the question of female inequality in Achebe’s novel, in Atta’s novel both questions
are prioritized equally. With Adichie’s novel, the question of female inequality is given priority over the question of Western cultural imperialism. In *Purple Hibiscus*, female equality has improved in Nigeria since the settings of both Achebe’s and Atta’s novels; however, the same issue of men being favored over women in Nigerian law continues to persist. This bias takes an ironic turn at the climax of the novel when Jaja is blamed and arrested for the death of Papa Eugene, who is actually killed by Jaja’s mother, Beatrice. Since the Nigerian law perceives murder as a masculine crime, Beatrice’s confession is ignored.

**Nigerian History**

In “The Decolonized Home: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus,*” Susan Strehle explores the history of Nigeria since British colonization of the country in the mid-nineteenth century. She states that “Nigeria first encountered Western domination in the spiritual realm” (102). Before Nigerians were forced to forget their traditions, they were pressured by Christian missionaries to accept Christianity. In *The History of Nigeria*, Toyin Falola states that Catholic and protestant organizations from Europe and North America sent missionaries to Nigeria between 1842 and 1892. These missionaries would recruit Africans to help spread Christianity throughout the south of Nigeria (40-42). In his novel, the image that Achebe provides on the actions of the British missionaries strongly align with Strehle’s description of these missionaries. Achebe brings attention to the spiritual influence the British missionaries had on the villagers in Umuofia. This is especially evident in the following passage from the novel in which a white, British missionary visits a nearby village to Umuofia, Mbanta, and speaks to the villagers living in that village: “And he told them about this new God, the Creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone” (Achebe 145). The white missionary’s speech to the villagers in Mbanta is a narrative
example of the British missionaries using religion to culturally assimilate people in Nigeria. While building on her point that the British colonizers seized Nigeria beginning with colonization of the country’s spiritual domain, Strehle refers to Elizabeth Isichei’s book, *A History of Nigeria* to argue that the British missionaries not only condemned the religion followed by Igbo Nigerians but condemned “most aspects of traditional religion and society as the work of the devil” (326). In Achebe’s novel, the white missionary equates the beliefs of the Igbo Nigerian villagers in Mbanta to evil. He tells the villagers in Mbanta the following: “We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die…” (Achebe 145)

Nigeria became free from British colonization in 1960 but the aftereffects of colonization are still evident. During the period of colonization, the British spread teachings about African barbarity to the locals and these teachings continue to influence Nigerian social and political life. Strehle states that “as a legacy of Western teachings about African barbarity, Nigeria appears to be plagued by barbarous forms of oppression, sectarian violence, and massive corruption” (Strehle 105). One example of the sectarian violence she describes are the tensions between the Islamic, Hausa-speaking north and the Christian south of Nigeria, and between the Yoruba-speaking West and Igbo-speaking East (105-106). Strehle also points to the Biafran War, which resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Biafra between the late 1960s and early 1970s. The ultimate causes behind both the religious and cultural divides in Nigeria were British colonial occupation and the advancing of British commercial interests. The religious divide in Nigeria is touched upon in Atta’s novel, as in her narration, Enitan at times compares her own religion, Christianity, to Sheri’s religion, Islam to reflect on the differences in their family customs.
In the decades following Nigeria’s independence from British colonization, the rights of Nigerian women have not improved significantly. As evident in Achebe’s novel, the rights and freedoms of Nigerian women were severely limited even prior to colonization. Sadly, the rights and freedoms of women are also limited by Western patriarchal practices. Strehle states that the “underlying assumptions of male priority and power met reinforcement from Western patriarchy in and after colonialism, leaving African women doubly oppressed” (106). She argues that local patriarchal oppression added to the legacy of imperial domination in Nigeria, and this combination created heavy burdens for Nigerian women. Patriarchal oppression was embedded in beliefs and customs, “ranging from polygamy and circumcision (or female genital cutting) to the privileging of men in marital systems and the favoring of sons” (106). Strehle argues that these patriarchal beliefs and customs survive in various African countries to this day.

**The Trope of Silence**

Silence is a governing trope in all three of the novels discussed in this paper. In Achebe’s novel, silence is evident in the compliance that Okonkwo outrightly demands from his wives. It is also evident in the vast difference between how male subjects are presented throughout the novel compared to how female subjects are presented. In Atta’s novel, silence is present within Enitan’s own household as she is controlled heavily by her mother, Arinola who herself is a silenced subject. In Adichie’s novel, Eugene uses domestic abuse to create silence within his household. Silence is also evident in the public as the Nigerian government silences the voices of many of its citizens because of its corruption. It is crucial to study the relevance of silence in postcolonial literatures as in his book, *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft describes the concept of silence as the active characteristic linking all postcolonial texts together (187). It is crucial to study the relevance of silence in postcolonial literatures as in Bill Ashcroft’s Gareth Griffith’s,
and Helen Tiffin’s book, *The Empire Writes Back*, the concept of silence is described as the active characteristic linking all postcolonial texts together (187).

In Adichie’s novel, silence is a consequence of Eugene’s strict control over his wife and his children within the household. Eugene demands silence from everyone in his family, and if Kambili, her brother, Jaja, and their mother, Beatrice, are not silent according to his demands, he physically abuses and tortures them. Despite this, Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice learn to communicate with their eyes while remaining physically silent in front of Eugene. Kambili reflects on these moments in her household when her brother, her mother, and she herself were forced to keep silent by her father. She narrates, “I let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirit than our lips” (Adichie 16). The silence within Kambili’s household parallels the silence in the public sphere. In “Daddy’s Girls?: Father-Daughter Relations and the Failures of the Postcolonial Nation-State in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and Veronique Tadjo’s *Loin de Mon Pére,*” Anna-Leena Toivanen states that “the silence that marks [Kambili’s] family life can be read as an allegory of the political situation [in Nigeria] in which the military government strives to maintain its vision of truth by violent suppression of critical voices” (109). Building further on this point, Toivanen argues that Kambili is not only silenced by her father’s “authoritarian” legacy, but she is also silenced by the Nigerian “post-colonial nation-state” (112). Thus, in Adichie’s novel, silence within the household strongly parallels silence within Nigerian society.

In Atta’s novel, silence takes the form of an abusive relationship between a mother and her daughter which partly occurs because of intergenerational trauma. The first line of the novel draws attention towards the silence that Enitan lived through before meeting Sheri. Enitan narrates, “From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even about how
best to behave…” (Atta 7). After meeting Sheri, Enitan attempts to rebel against her mother by switching between conformity and subversion when interacting with her. In front of Arinola, Enitan is compliant, but when Arinola is absent, Enitan rebels against her in secrecy. Arinola herself is a silenced subject as evident in the struggles that she encountered throughout her own childhood. Arinola’s father stole the money that her mother had saved for her education, and he used that money to marry another woman. Shortly afterwards, Arinola’s mother died, and Arinola married her husband, Enitan’s father, Sunny. Arinola married Sunny not out of true love but for the need of money. It is polygamy and poor living conditions that have shaped Arinola into a silenced subject, and she translates this silence in her own life into the way she raises Enitan. Thus, in Atta’s novel, silence is passed on from one abused generation of women to another as Arinola restricts Enitan from enjoying a healthy childhood because of the restrictions that she experienced herself while growing up.

In Achebe’s novel, silence is evident throughout the gendered presentation of subjects not only in the beginning of the novel but in the beginning of many of the chapters in the novel. In “Sexual/Textual Politics: Representations of Gender in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart,” Saba Shouq explores how the female Nigerian subject is silenced throughout the presentation in Achebe’s novel. Shouq states that Achebe opens chapters, 8, 14, and 24 directly with “Okonkwo,” demonstrating the point that Achebe consistently and overwhelmingly uses repetitions of the hero’s name, the male name, and the male pronoun (68). Even if some of the chapters in Achebe’s novel do not directly begin with “Okonkwo,” they do begin with descriptions of him, as evident in the openings of Chapters 7, 9, and 15. Shouq argues that Achebe presents the openings of chapters throughout his novel this way to highlight the social positioning of the male protagonist in the novel (69). However, by doing this, Achebe has
significantly silenced the presentation of the female subjects in his novel. In fact, in the novel’s first chapter, not a single female subject is introduced. Only the male subjects like Okonkwo, Unoka, Cat, Okoye, and Ikemefuna are introduced. The vast difference in presentation of that between the male subject and the female subject in Achebe’s novel feeds into an argument that Dale Spender makes in his book, *Man Made Language*. Spender argues that “we construct a view of the world in which males continue to be seen as superior, and females continue to be seen as inferior, thereby perpetuating the myth and reinforcing the justification of male power” (1980). By repeatedly opening many of the chapters in his novel with “Okonkwo” or a description of Okonkwo and by not introducing any of the narrative’s female subjects within the novel’s first chapter, Achebe has silenced the importance of the identity of the female subject all throughout his novel.

As briefly outlined above in reference to the novels under discussion, the concept of silence in postcolonial criticism, and in postcolonial feminism in particular, points to ways in which the female perspective—whether as a narrative voice or as a serious location of meaning making in a narrative—is missing or marginalized. As well, silence can be depicted as literally a loss/lack of voice wherein female characters are forced to remain silent in oppressive situations. The concept of silence also refers to circumstances in which the ways of knowing and the cultural meaning of colonized peoples have historically been suppressed and denigrated. All of these understandings and expressions of silence are evident in Achebe’s, Adichie’s and Atta’s narratives.

*Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie’s novel is set in postcolonial Nigeria of the 1990s during a military coup, and it explores the cultural conflict between Christian Catholic and Nigerian traditions. In “Purple
Hibiscus: A Postcolonial Feminist Reading,” Musa W. Dube explores this cultural conflict in depth. The cultural conflict between Christian Catholic traditions and Igbo Nigerian traditions is evident in the character of Eugene and the attitude that he shows towards his father, Papa Nnukwu, who prefers to follow the path of African indigenous ways of worship (6). The physical setting of Adichie’s novel is the town of Nssuka, which Dube describes as a “feminist space of liberation” (232). In her article, Toivanen states that “Kambili’s family lives under the constant threat of a religiously motivated domestic violence, and the narrative draws a parallel between the violent father figure and authoritarian military rule” (106). The narrative makes the point that the violent military coup that disrupts peoples’ lives is a legacy of British colonialism and a form of neocolonialism; and it bears a lot of resemblance to Eugene’s expression of Christian-coded patriarchy. Aunty Ifeoma’s struggle with juggling between her family responsibilities as a widow and her job as a university lecturer sheds light on the unstable Nigerian economy of the novel. Many of the flaws in Nigeria’s economy are quite visible within the setting of Nssuka University. These flaws appear as issues in the university’s administration, including issues like unpaid salaries, issues within authoritarian management, and career stagnation that has been driving staff members in the university into exile (112). In the novel, Aunty Ifeoma states that “the educated ones leave, the ones with the potential to right the wrongs. They leave the weak behind. The tyrants continue to reign because the weak cannot exist” (Adichie 244-245). Her words bring attention to the brain drain that has been deteriorating Nigeria’s economy in the late twentieth century.

Kambili’s father, Papa Eugene often demands complete obedience from Kambili, her brother, Jaja, and their mother Beatrice, and if they fail to show him that obedience, he
inhumanely tortures them. Kambili compares the cruelty in Papa Eugene’s beatings to the behavior that a Fulani nomad shows towards his cows. She narrates,

Sometimes I watched the Fulani nomads, white jellabas flapping against their legs in the wind, making clucking sounds as they herded their cows across the roads in Enugu with a switch, each smack of the switch swift and precise. Papa was like a Fulani nomad – although he did not have their spare, tall body – as he swung his belt at Mama, Jaja, and me, muttering that the devil would not win. (Adichie 102)

In her article, Dube explores silence as a sign of oppression. She states that “silence is more often than not a sign of oppression, for the subjugated are denied the right to speak and to be heard” (Dube 231). This is certainly the case in Kambili’s household as Kambili, Jaja, and Beatrice only speak when Papa Eugene permits them to speak. The victim of such horrid silencing has so much to say and yet remains mute. Kambili narrates, “I said nothing. There was so much I wanted to say and so much I did not want to say” (Adichie 235). Kambili, a rather passive subject, at times yearns to rebel openly against Papa Eugene but just when she is about to do so, she changes her mind and instead suppresses her anger and internalizes her suffering.

One of the main conflicts that take place throughout Adichie’s novel is the conflict between the spiritual and cultural views of Eugene and his sister, Ifeoma. In the abstract of her article, Dube describes Eugene as “a colonized subject embodying violence of a colonial past,” and Ifeoma as “a decolonizing postcolonial feminist subject” (22). Furthermore, Kambili recounts that Aunty Ifeoma once described her father as “too much of a colonial product” (Adichie 13). Whereas Eugene attempts to silence Kambili and Jaja and mold them into colonial products just like himself, Aunty Ifeoma attempts to free them from the shackles of colonialism. Ifeoma lost her husband to a tragic accident years ago, and as a widow she struggles to take care
of her three children. Her main strength lies in her class position as an intellectual and her profession as a university lecturer. It is Ifeoma’s intellectual class which allows her to resist against Eugene’s use of financial power to enforce his understanding of Catholicism upon her and her family. It is also Ifeoma’s class which allows her to resist against the public pressure to remarry despite her struggle in raising three children all on her own (Dube 223).

In her article, Dube introduces terminology that is essential to understand postcolonial literatures. She discusses the significance of the postcolonial framework which refers to the “spiral of cultural histories, economic structure and political systems that continue to overlap in time and space of continents and countries ever since modern colonial contact zones” (227). Dube also references “epistemic violence,” a term originally coined by literary theorist and postcolonial feminist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak has defined epistemic violence as “the destruction of indigenous languages, culture, and thought that accompanies cultural conquest” (Spivak 1999). Epistemic violence is apparent within the narrative of Adichie’s novel, particularly in the scene in which Eugene horribly beats Kambili while trying to snatch away the painting of Papa Nnukwu from her grip. Based on his resentment towards indigenous Nigerian traditions, it is apparent that Eugene is indeed the “colonial product” that Aunty Ifeoma describes him to be. He associates speaking English with civilization. Dube elaborates on this association by arguing that Eugene’s preference for his language of worship and liturgy to be English may suggest the belief that God must be white, and English must be a heavenly language (229). The rigidness in Eugene’s cultural and spiritual beliefs is what fuels the epistemic violence that he incites upon his family. Dube argues that “Papa Eugene exhibits an extremely colonized mind that relegates the African belief system to the realm of evil” (230). The epistemic violence that Eugene inflicts upon his family in addition to his extreme beliefs throughout the novel
demonstrate that he is unwilling to think beyond his extremely colonized mindset until his very death in the novel’s climax.

Eugene’s character sheds light on not only domestic violence within the Nigerian household, but also on the political state of Nigeria. Outside in Nigerian society, Eugene is known as a “good Christian” and successful businessman. In his private life, however, Eugene abuses his patriarchal authority, and his fatherhood is defined by the silence that he demands from his children (Toivanen 107). In her article, Toivanen carefully analyzes Eugene’s dual personality, and she argues that “the two ‘faces’ of the father give the false impression that the familial and the social are two separate spheres” (107). One of these spheres is the public sphere, which features Eugene as a political activist, and the other sphere is the private sphere which features him as a “repressive patriarch” (107). Toivanen argues that by constructing Eugene in such complex terms, the narrative refuses to portray him as purely evil (108). Despite being treated so poorly by Eugene, Kambili expresses nothing but shock and sorrow when she hears about his death. She narrates, “I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that Papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He had seemed immortal” (Adichie 287). Kambili’s description of Eugene seeming immortal to her demonstrates that regardless of his cruelty towards her, she always thought rather highly of him. Despite Eugene’s cruelty towards his family and his extremely colonized mindset, Adichie’s refusal to portray him as a purely evil subject draws sympathy towards him and brings attention to the fact that he was not born a colonial product but became one through assimilation.

Kambili’s brother, Jaja, and Father Amadi are the two major male figures in Adichie’s novel who challenge Eugene’s colonial mindset. Toivanen indicates that it is Kambili’s brother, Jaja, who embodies the idea of revolt in the novel’s first chapter (109). Jaja’s revolt begins
during the first holiday that he and Kambili spend at Aunty Ifeoma’s house. While saying the rosary, Jaja becomes emotional when he sees his aunt and his cousins singing, something that Papa Eugene restricted him from doing all his life. Jaja yearns to sing in the rosary with his cousins, but Kambili restricts him from doing so. Kambili narrates, “My eyes met Jaja’s. His eyes were watery, full of suggestions. No! I told him, with a tight blink. It was not right. You did not break into song in the middle of the rosary” (Adichie 125). By witnessing Jaja’s revolt against Papa Eugene, Kambili notices an awakening masculinity in her younger brother. Noticing this awakening masculinity in Jaja makes Kambili see him as more of an authority figure and a potential rival to their father (Toivanen 110). Unlike Jaja who at one point outrightly confronts Papa Eugene for his abuse, Kambili is never directly able to confront her father and she remains silent. Her resistance against Papa Eugene’s neglect and abuse is always undermined by her “seemingly contradictory longing” for a strong father figure (111). Eugene is a neglectful father to Kambili as his love for her depends largely on her devotion towards Catholicism and her academic performance in school.

It is Kambili’s relationship with Father Amadi which allows her to discover her personhood and find the courage to question things. Strehle describes Father Amadi as a decolonizing force, and she states that “Kambili’s unreserved love for the young priest leads her away from the system of self-hatred that has interpellated her father” (116). Whereas Eugene’s punishments of Kambili reflect a sustained condemnation of his children, Father Amadi’s gentle and loving attention towards Kambili restores her dignity and self-respect. With Father Amadi’s help, Kambili discovers new faiths beyond Christianity, the religion which she followed all throughout her life. These new faiths that Kambili discovers include renewed understandings of her body, her race, her gender, her nation, and her future. Strehle argues that “[Father Amadi]
shows [Kambili] the way to the decolonized soul in a version of the Western religion that embraces and honors Africa” (120). Rather than pressuring Kambili to accept new beliefs like Papa Eugene did, Father Amadi encourages her to build a bridge between her past beliefs and her new beliefs. Eugene has been such a cruel father to Kambili that she has been desperately searching for a father figure all her life, and this desperation is assuaged by the admiration that she feels for Father Amadi.

The courage that Father Amadi helps Kambili to discover is most visible in the scene in which she attempts to save the painting of her grandfather from being destroyed by Papa Eugene. In her article, “Subversive Responses to Oppression in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus,” Sandra Nwokotcha analyzes both Kambili’s and her mother’s resistance against Eugene’s domestic abuse. Eugene’s brutality is evident in Kambili’s description of the pain that his kicking causes her as she silently protects her late grandfather’s memory from him. Kambili narrates, “He started to kick me. The metal buckles on his slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitos” (Adichie 210). This scene describes Kambili’s indirect resistance of her father. Despite the extreme violence that Eugene inflicts upon Kambili’s body, she does not release the painting of Papa Nnukwu until the moment she faints. Kambili’s defiance against Eugene can be read as what Nwokotcha calls Kambili’s “distinctive mode of resistance that is born from years of abuse” (371). This distinctive mode of resistance is partly characterized by not only Kambili’s newfound relationships and memories with her cousins but also by her taste in music. It is Kambili’s memory of Amaka and her music which allows her to resist against Eugene’s kicking in this violent scene. Kambili narrates, “The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka’s music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing” (Adichie 211). Whereas Kambili once stopped Jaja from
singing with his cousins during the rosary at Aunty Ifeoma’s house, she herself is now seeking refuge in music as a means of coping with her father’s violent behavior towards her. Furthermore, the fact that Kambili bravely resists against Eugene’s cruel punishment signals the moment in the novel in which Eugene’s regime of control is at its weakest. He is finally met by a level of resistance that he never expected from his children. Strehle makes the following observation when as she discusses Kambili’s cousin’s, Amaka’s, painting of their grandfather: “Amaka’s representation of her grandfather – condemned and destroyed by her father – evokes Kambili’s own emerging subject position as an African, and thus she puts her body down on the floor in silent defence of her grandfather” (121). Amaka’s painting of their grandfather has inspired Kambili to treasure the painting for the rest of her life and, therefore, Kambili has used her silence to protect her late grandfather’s memory from being destroyed by her father.

When Eugene’s beating causes Beatrice to suffer a miscarriage, she silently plots vengeance against him. The extreme nature of Eugene’s abuse that ultimately results in Beatrice’s miscarriage is what Nwokotcha describes as Eugene’s intolerance to opposition and his intolerance towards Beatrice’s freedom (371-372). Nwokotcha refers to the following passage from Simone de Beauvoir’s book, *The Second Sex*: “for a woman there is no other way than to work for her liberation” (Beauvoir 664). To work for her liberation from Eugene’s brutal physical torture and to avenge the miscarriage that she has suffered because of such torture, Beatrice feels that she must innovate a very clever and effective method of murdering Eugene. By voicing her need to Eugene to be allowed to adjust her curfew, Beatrice takes the first step in taking control of her life. She will further seize this control by killing her husband (Nwokotcha 372). The careful steps that Beatrice takes to seize control of her life closely resemble Beauvoir’s argument that a woman must work for her liberation. Nwokotcha states that “Adichie presents
the character of Beatrice as a subversive personality whose minor acts of resistance are a prelude to her eventual radical response to oppression” (6). Nwokotcha describes Beatrice’s outward passivity towards Eugene as a disguised form of resistance because neither Eugene nor their neighbours believed that Beatrice could commit the crime that she commits by gradually poisoning Eugene to death. Committing this crime appears to be out character for Beatrice although it is a result of her deep resentment towards Eugene for murdering the child in her womb.

Beatrice’s refusal to mourn Eugene’s death in accordance with Nigerian customs demonstrates her resistance towards him even after his death. Beatrice refuses to wear all black or all white for an entire year in addition to refusing to attend first and second year memorial masses. She also refuses to cut her hair (Adichie 296). Nwokotcha argues that “if a widow’s loud wail helps her deceased husband’s soul to rest in peace, then Beatrice’s blatant refusal to mourn can be read as a punishment of Eugene’s soul” (374). It is Beatrice’s actions within the climax of Adichie’s novel that contribute to the classification of the novel as a revolutionary feminist work. Because murder is perceived as a masculine crime according to patriarchal Nigerian views, Beatrice’s neighbours are unable to believe her when she tells them that it is she herself who murdered her husband. The Nigerian community is inclined to believe that it is Jaja who murdered Eugene because Jaja is a male and murder is seen as a masculine crime in patriarchal Nigerian society. In other words, Beatrice’s confession of murdering Eugene is considered absurd and unrealistic in the eyes of patriarchal Nigerian society as it goes against the social expectations of the ideal Nigerian woman. This ideal Nigerian woman is what Nwokotcha describes as “an innocent, calm, gentle, passive, and sacrificial woman who surrenders all so as to gain the respect of the community” (375). Thus, another reason why Beatrice’s neighbours do
not believe her when she tells them that she murdered her husband is because it does not resemble the innocent, calm, and gentle woman that they know her as.

Unlike Beatrice who silently (at least until she kills him) resists against Eugene, Ifeoma openly resists against him. Ifeoma’s character embodies what Nwokotcha describes as Adichie’s “radical feminist worldview” (375). Nwokotcha describes “radical feminism” as a call for social reordering within a situation in which patriarchy creates a disparity and unfairness between men and women (369). Whereas Beatrice demonstrates passive resistance against Eugene, Ifeoma demonstrates more active resistance against him. When planning a funeral for Papa Nnukwu, Eugene expresses his desire to give his father, who was a traditionalist, a Catholic funeral. He states, “I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral” (Adichie 189). Eugene’s reluctance towards giving Papa Nnukwu an Igbo funeral angers Ifeoma and she yells, “I will put my dead husband’s grave up for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral.” Furthermore, she asks him, “Was our father a Catholic? I ask you. Eugene, was he a Catholic?” (189). Ifeoma outrightly resists against her brother’s wishes in giving their father a funeral that is unrepresentative of the traditionalist views and lifestyle that their father followed all throughout his life. Nwokotcha argues that it is Ifeoma’s refusal to be silent and her prompt confrontational approach against the conventions of gender and power politics within the novel’s setting which shape her as Adichie’s radical feminist model in the text (375). Ifeoma’s proactive approach towards gender conventions is evident in the advice that she gives Beatrice after hearing about the torture that Eugene has inflicted upon her for such a long time. Ifeoma advises Beatrice, “When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head” (Adichie 219-220). In The Second Sex, Beauvoir states that “marriage [ought to be viewed] as a free engagement where spouses could break when
they wanted to” (760). This is the same view that Ifeoma shares as she advises Beatrice to take her children and leave her marriage to Eugene. Ifeoma’s advice to Beatrice establishes Ifeoma herself as a subversive subject who encourages divorce over endurance as a viable solution to marital problems. Although Beatrice does not directly appear to follow Ifeoma’s advice, she does resist against Eugene’s repression in a calm and progressive manner until she succeeds in killing him. Nwokotcha argues that by portraying the methods of resistance between Ifeoma and Beatrice so differently, Adichie is promoting spontaneous resistance as a radical feminist strategy (376).

*Everything Good Will Come*

Atta’s novel, *Everything Good Will Come*, is set in the turbulent years in Nigeria, particularly between 1971 and 1995, shortly after the Biafran War (Mtenje 67). The novel’s protagonist, Enitan, reflects on Nigeria’s political conditions in the following passage: “I knew that our Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had another Major General heading our country. For a while the palaver had stopped, and now it seemed the Biafrans were trying to split the country in two” (Atta 9). Enitan’s description of the government and form of political leadership in Nigeria brings attention to the war environment and political corruption that function as an important backdrop in the narrative.

Enitan is harshly controlled by her mother, Arinola who pressures her to conform to the sexist stereotypes that dictate how the ideal Nigerian woman should behave. In “Bad Girls Get Raped, Good Girls Go to Heaven: Sexuality and Respectability in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*,” Asante Lucy Mtenje closely studies the good woman/bad woman binary as constructed by patriarchal Nigerian culture. Mtenje describes the respectable woman as someone perceived as a dignified member of society, and the unrespectable woman as someone seen as
lacking in dignity by society (67). Enitan is forced by her mother to accept conventionalised Nigerian femaleness, and this silences Enitan as she struggles to live her life according to her own interests. The mother is seen above the daughter in this hierarchal relationship, a relationship that is influenced by religion and generational authority (71). Arinola uses emotional abuse and what Mtenje calls the “psychic violence of shaming” as an effective technique for governing her daughter’s behavior (72). Furthermore, Arinola describes sex as a filthy act after which one must always wash oneself (Atta 23). This saddens Enitan as she describes her mother’s teaching with tears in her eyes: “Tears filled my eyes. The prospect of dying young seemed better now” (23). In “Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice,” Patricia McFadden argues that in “all patriarchal societies, women, and girls are taught, consistently and often violently that their bodies are dirty, nasty, smelly, disgusting, corrupting, imperfect, ugly and volatile harbingers of disease and immorality” (52). This idea of the female body being associated with disgust is certainly evident in the ways in which Enitan’s mother misguides her as she ultimately teaches Enitan to associate her own body with filth. Arinola is a major colonizing force in Atta’s novel, and she influences Enitan to be ignorant towards understanding her own sexualized femininity (Mtenje 76).

It is Sheri who rescues Enitan from her silence and encourages her to discover her sexuality. Enitan has never closely looked at her vagina until Sheri teaches her how to do it using a mirror. Enitan narrates this experience in the following passage from the novel: “I dragged my panties down, placed the mirror between my legs. It looked like a big, fat slug. I squealed as Sheri began to laugh” (Atta 33). Despite her mother’s restrictions on embracing female sexuality, Enitan forms her own opinion about what a sexually desirable female body looks like. She narrates, “In our country, women were hailed for having huge buttocks. I wanted to be fatter,
fatter, fatter, with a pretty face, and I wanted boys to like me” (46). Enitan experiences sexual desires and fantasies that are normal for a girl of her age to experience despite her mother’s disapproval of such desires and fantasies. Sheri insists that Enitan reads a romance novel titled *Jacaranda Cove*, and reading this novel is one of the first risks that Enitan takes towards discovering her sexuality.

When Sheri is raped by three local neighbourhood boys, Enitan refuses to support her and this betrayal on Enitan’s part demonstrates her initial ungratefulness towards Sheri. Throughout their teenage years, Enitan and Sheri possess entirely different personalities. Enitan narrates that “[Sheri] had the best misadventures: parties that ended in brawls, cinemas where audiences talked back to the screen. Once, she hitched a ride from a friend who borrowed his parents’ car” (Atta 52). Enitan compares Sheri’s carefree lifestyle to her own lifestyle and narrates, “She was a bold-face, unlike me. I worried about breaking school rules, failing exams” (52). Enitan’s narration evokes a tone of jealousy as she is restricted by her parents from enjoying the things that Sheri enjoys. Part of the reason why Enitan blames Sheri for Sheri’s own rape is because of the impression that she already has of Sheri. Sheri takes Enitan to a picnic one day while Enitan’s parents are away. During the picnic, what begins as a dance between Sheri and three neighbourhood boys changes into a rape incident. While two of the neighbourhood boys hold Sheri down against a car seat, the third boy rapes her. Enitan describes this incident in the following passage from the novel: “Sheri was lying on the seat. Her knees were spread apart. The boy in the cap was pinning her arms down. The portly boy was on top of her. His hands were clamped over her mouth” (Atta 62). Rather than seeking justice for her friend, Enitan expresses disgust towards the state of Sheri’s body following the incident and blames Sheri for her own rape. Enitan describes the state of Sheri’s body in the following passage: “I dressed her, saw the
red bruises and scratches on her skin, her wrists, around her mouth, on her hips. She stunk of cigarettes, alcohol, sweat. There was blood on her pubic hairs, thick spit running down her legs. Semen” (63). The presence of the word, “semen,” in a separate one-word sentence indicates Enitan’s disgust towards Sheri’s situation and it foreshadows the blame that she is about to place on Sheri very soon. Enitan narrates, “Yes. I blamed her. If she hadn’t stayed as long as she did at that party, it would certainly not have happened” (65). Enitan not only blames Sheri for staying late at the party, but she also blames the carefree lifestyle that Sheri lived prior to the incident. Enitan narrates, “Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys, following them around, thinking she was one of them. Now, I could smell their semen on her, and it was making me sick. It was her fault” (65). Enitan implies that according to the perspective of the patriarchal Nigerian society, it was the loose, forward, raw, advanced, and altogether “bad” girls who got raped and Sheri was one of them. By blaming Sheri so harshly for Sheri’s own rape, Enitan has not only silenced the female victim of a rape, but she has also betrayed the friend who taught her the importance of discovering her own female sexuality. It is this horrible incident which sparks the plot of Atta’s novel as even though Enitan and Sheri become distant from each other for years, they eventually reunite to reconfront this incident from the past.

The aftermath of Sheri’s rape draws attention to the corruption in the Nigerian legal system. Initially, Enitan does not speak to anyone about Sheri’s rape. Enitan’s parents become aware of the incident from their neighbours, and they also become aware that Enitan was with Sheri when Sheri was raped. Upon being questioned by her parents about whether she had any involvement in Sheri’s rape, Enitan tells them that she “didn’t do anything.” (68). Enitan’s response to her parents demonstrates that at this point of the narrative, she has given into the
influence of patriarchy and like many other Nigerians, she has given up on the Nigerian law in bringing justice to a female victim of rape. Years later when Enitan is in boarding school, she talks to her friend Robin, about Sheri’s rape. While doing so, she reflects on the outcome of one of the neighbourhood boys who raped Sheri, Damola. Enitan narrates,

For Sheri, justice came when Damola Ajayi was admitted into a mental institution where drug addicts in Lagos ended up; therapy included regular beatings. I wasn’t even sure she knew about his demise. Her family moved out of our neighbourhood and I lost contact with her. Robin assured me that justice was not much fairer in her country. (Atta 75)

Arguably, Damola’s outcome serves as indirect justice for Sheri. However, this outcome is not a direct consequence of him raping Sheri. Furthermore, Sheri may be unaware of Damola being admitted to a mental institution. Enitan’s description of Damola’s admittance into a mental institution as justice for Sheri sheds light on the lack of legal justice for female victims of rape in Nigeria.

Whereas Sheri helps Enitan to discover her sexuality, Mike, Enitan’s short-term boyfriend, helps her to discover her personhood. At one instance in the novel, Mike bathes Enitan and despite being bathed by a male, Enitan discovers the maternal affection that she never received from her mother. She narrates, “But Mike washed me with the gentlest motions, like a mother washing her baby. I felt sure my fear was like any other fear; like the fear of a dog bite, or of fire, or of falling from heights; or death. I was certain I would never be ashamed again” (133). Mike’s tenderness towards Enitan helps her to make sense of her fear and understand that it is possible for her to conquer this fear, the fear that she thought she would never be able to overcome. A moment later, Enitan experiences a flashback to Sheri’s rape, and she initially
hesitates to share this flashback with Mike. She believes that she is “hurt only by association” and that this story was never hers to tell (133). Enitan’s stream of consciousness draws attention to the fact that rape traumatises not only the victim of a rape, but also the witness of a rape. Enitan describes her retelling of the physical setting of the rape to Mike: “The faster I spoke, the easier it became: the picnic, the rain, the lagoon, the van. The boys. I sounded fake to my own ears. In my mind’s eye, I was standing there, that day, thankful to be safe, glad to be un tarnished” (Atta 133). Enitan’s manner of describing the different physical spaces associated with the setting of Sheri’s rape emphasizes the intensity of the traumatic flashback that she experiences years after the incident. However, as Enitan expressed herself, she is grateful to not have been raped herself, reaffirming the idea that only the victim of a rape truly knows how horrible it is and the one who witnesses rape can only be grateful to have not gone through it themselves.

Enitan reflects on how easily the Nigerian woman is judged by patriarchal Nigerian society. She states, “If a woman sneezed in my country, someone would call her a feminist” (200). Thus, in this context the term, “feminist” is being used to describe any woman who fails to abide by the manners and customs that are expected of her by Nigerian norms. Enitan describes the three different prototypes that the otherwise diverse personalities of Nigerian women are reduced to. She narrates, “By the time they came of age, millions of personalities were channeled into three prototypes, strong and silent, chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kindhearted” (200). The “strong and silent” prototype shows that a silent Nigerian woman is appreciated over an outspoken Nigerian woman. The presence of such a prototype demonstrates how inclined patriarchal Nigerian society is towards silencing the Nigerian woman. Society expects the ideal Nigerian woman to have a loving quality. One day when her husband Niyi is unhappy with
Enitan’s cooking, he criticizes her cooking for lacking taste because of her lack of being domesticated and her lack of having that loving quality that a domesticated Nigerian woman has. Enitan narrates this encounter between herself and Niyi in the following passage from the novel: “Niyi said it would taste so much better if only I learned to cook with a sweeter disposition” (214). Niyi tells Enitan, “You are not a domesticated woman. You just don’t have that…loving quality” (214). His words imply that to cook well, a Nigerian woman must be domesticated. The three prototypes that all Nigerian women are reduced to alongside Niyi’s expectations from Enitan as his wife, demonstrate how much patriarchal Nigerian society pressures its women to become domesticated, obedient to male authority, and ultimately silenced.

Enitan’s argument with her father, Sunny, draws attention towards gender inequality not only in *Everything Good Will Come*, but even today in twenty-first century Nigeria. One day Enitan has an argument with Sunny about women’s rights in Nigeria. During this argument she states,

Show me one case: Just one, of a woman having two husbands, a fifty year old woman marrying a twelve year old boy. We have women judges and women can’t legally post bail. I’m a lawyer. If I were married, I would need my husband’s consent to get a new passport. He would be entitled to discipline me with a slap or two, as long as he doesn’t cause me grievous bodily harm. (Atta 141)

Nigerian law supports Nigerian men abusing their wives and allows these men to limit the progress that their wives make in their individual careers. In her memoranda, *We Should All Be Feminists*, Adichie delves into all the different ways in which female inequality runs throughout Nigeria. In one passage, she explores female inequality within household responsibilities
between a husband and a wife despite them both having the same degree and the same job.

Adichie states,

I know a woman who has the same degree and same job as her husband. When they get back from work, she does most of the housework, which is true for many marriages, but what struck me was that whenever he changed the baby’s nappy, she said thank you to him. What if she saw it as something normal and natural, that he should help care for his child? (Adichie 37)

Despite Enitan having a university education and working full time like Niyi, he expects her to complete household chores which he himself does not commit to. Furthermore, the things that Niyi says to Enitan demonstrate his sexist preference in domesticating her and molding her into a housewife, and it is this sexist preference that ultimately causes Enitan to leave her marriage to Niyi in the end of the novel.

In “Gender Inclusive Language and Female Assertive Idiolects in Sefi Atta’s Everything Good Will Come: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal,” Innocent Sourou Koutchadé analyzes the different ways in which Nigerian law oppresses and silences women. The following passage in Atta’s novel sheds light on the lack of attention that Nigerian law gives to cases of domestic violence: “There’s nothing in our constitution for kindness at home” (Atta 193). Koutchadé argues that Atta’s fiction displays female subjects that are fed up with coping with being dominated and oppressed by men. These female subjects, including both Enitan and eventually Sheri as well, do not want to live like their mothers (Koutchadé 1920). They refuse to succumb to a cycle of intergenerational trauma. Eventually, Enitan’s mother who has once tried to teach her about the importance of only cooking for a man and not participating in the workforce, in her last days, shortly prior to her death, advises Enitan to not make a sacrifice for a man. Arinola
tells Enitan, “Never make sacrifices for a man. By the time you say, ‘Look what I’ve done for you,’ it’s too late. They never remember” (Atta 173). Whereas earlier in the narrative Arinola stresses the importance of being loyal to one’s husband in a marriage, at this point she is advising Enitan to exercise her boundaries within her marriage. Koutchadé partly concludes his article by stating that “Atta instructs women on the way out of retrograde patriarchal domination through the practical actions of gender assertive Enitan, Sheri, Mrs. Ameh, and even the Mother of the Prison” (1921). Thus, with her novel, Atta educates Nigerian women on the importance of the advocacy for equal rights within the context of Nigerian marriage and to understand when to walk away from an abusive marriage.

**Things Fall Apart**

In “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart,” Christopher Anyokwu analyzes issues of toxic masculinity and sexism throughout Achebe’s novel. Anyokwu states that “the gender situation has created dichotomies, polarities, and complexities between the sexes in society, and this has given rise to the ages-old battle of the sexes” (17). As a result of these dichotomies and complexities between sexes in society, many traditions have encouraged the psychic repression of the female sex, resulting in women being excluded from social affairs as though this exclusion is their natural place in life (17). With consideration to this argument, Anyokwu explores the gendering of wit and personality traits in Achebe’s novel. He states that being male connotes masculinity, manliness, courage, and raw physical strength and being female connotes tenderness, sentimentality, affection, love, and domesticity (18). Hence, within the context of Achebe’s novel, femaleness is often associated with failure and weakness. Anyokwu introduces the concept of the “female principle” as one’s ability to adapt to change. He describes this term as “the propulsive force of progressive change and social transformation”
Because of Okonkwo’s unwillingness to accept change, which he believes to be a feminine thing to do, he remains “male” all throughout the novel. Okonkwo’s suicide partly communicates the message that he would rather die than accept change like a female.

While studying Okonkwo’s sexist beliefs, Anyokwu compares Okonkwo to other male subjects in Achebe’s novel. Okonkwo’s friend, Obierika, is described as “a man who thought about things” (Achebe 125). Although Obierika’s achievements embody several of the qualities of an ideal male in pre-contact Nigeria, including being a successful farmer, a brave warrior, and a man with a title, his sense of balance provides a female side to him. Because Obierika possesses a balanced combination of both “male” and “female” traits, he is arguably a more likeable character than Okonkwo, who is cautious to not embody any female traits at all. As Okonkwo believes that thinking is associated with the feminine, he prefers to act without thinking and hence, in the novel, he is described as “not a man of thought but action” (69).

Okonkwo’s insecurity over the feminine principle is what causes him to resent his late father, Unoka. Whereas Okonkwo likes to embody the masculine principle, Unoka embodied more of the feminine principle (Anyokwu 20). Unoka was against war and violence and, unlike Okonkwo, his presence never posed a threat to group survival or social progress. The following passage from Achebe’s novel depicts Unoka’s peaceful personality: “He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace” (4). Unoka always enjoyed togetherness and celebrating joyful moments with music. During times of warfare in Nigeria, music would occupy a place of peace (Anwokyu 20). In fact, in Igbo Nigerian traditions, love and music would be helpful during difficult times because they uplifted the spirits of those who were distraught. Even
though Okonkwo dislikes music, it was Unoka’s music that assisted him in winning the memorable village wrestling match. The story of how Unoka’s music helped Okonkwo win the village wrestling match resonates with Anyokwu’s point that “art or works of imagination may probably be rightfully located within the domains of the female mystique” (21). Sadly, Okonkwo refuses to acknowledge that it was his father’s music that assisted him in winning the village wrestling match. Okonkwo’s ungratefulness towards Unoka is evident in his reference to Unoka as “agbala,” the Igbo term for a woman, or a man with no title. Although the term, “agbala” usually refers to a woman, Okonkwo’s first encounter with this word was when one of his school mates insulted his father, as evident in the following passage:

> Even as a little boy [Okonkwo] had resented his father’s failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. (Achebe 13)

Hence, the term, “agbala” which is used more than once throughout Achebe’s novel, is a derogatory term that draws attention towards the trope of toxic masculinity within the novel. In Shouq’s article, she elaborates on the meaning of “agbala,” which she describes as a term of abuse which downgrade’s one’s social position in the hierarchal structure of Igbo society. According to the hierarchal structure of Igbo society, a woman signifies weakness or no social status at all (Shouq 72). Thus, for a man to be called “agbala” is to abuse him. Okonkwo’s biggest insecurity stems from his fear of being called “agbala,” and this fear pushes him to do everything in his capability to avoid being called this name, which however ultimately leads to his downfall in the end of the novel.
Among the several things that are gendered throughout Achebe’s novel, a couple of the most unusual are space and crops. Anyokwu analyzes how cropping practices are gendered in the novel. To till the ground near one’s homestead was considered feminine work and cultivating crops a distance away within wild forests was considered masculine (Anwokyu 24). Unoka’s practice of tilling the ground right next to his house is one of the many reasons why Okonkwo describes him derogatorily as “agbala.” Crops themselves are gendered in the novel as evident in the following passage: “[Okonkwo’s] mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women’s crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man’s crop” (Achebe 22-23). In this passage, whereas three different female crops are mentioned, only one male crop, yam, is mentioned. This contrast demonstrates that by gendering crops between male and female crops, Okonkwo, and many of the other male villagers in Umuofia, are limiting themselves to cultivating only one species of crop.

Anyokwu explores what it means to be a male and what it means to be a female within the patriarchal Igbo Nigerian context of Things Fall Apart. He states that to be a male in the Igbo Nigerian traditional society one must be well-built, aggressive, and successful in business and farming, hunting, and fishing. Also, one must have a family with many wives and several children (Anyokwu 22). This description of what it means to be a male according to patriarchal Nigerian traditions demonstrates how normalized toxic masculinity and polygamy are within Nigerian society. To be a female in traditional Igbo Nigerian society, one must exhibit what Anyokwu describes as “moral weaknesses.” These moral weaknesses include gossiping, laziness, talkativeness, inconstancy, and fearfulness (22). When Okonkwo thinks about his son Nwoye who left his family’s clan and joined the British missionaries, he compares Nwoye to a female. Because of his strength, Okonkwo has been known all throughout Umuofia as the “Roaring
Flame” (Achebe 153). With this thought in mind, Okonkwo asks himself, “how could he have begotten a woman for a son?” (153) Because of Nwoye’s lack of loyalty towards his family’s clan, Okonkwo refers to him as a woman. Thus, based on Anyokwu’s description and Okonkwo’s thoughts about Nwoye, to be a female in patriarchal Nigerian society, a woman must possess rather negative qualities that are bound to prepare any person, regardless of gender, for failure.

At one point, Okonkwo’s disrespect for the feminine lands him at odds with his community. During the Week of Peace, all Igbo villagers are prohibited from fighting or raising a hand on one another. However, Okonkwo defies this custom. Upon noticing that one of his wives, Ojiugo, does not return home on time to cook an afternoon meal, Okonkwo beats her. While beating her, he completely forgets that it is the Week of Peace, and this is evident in the following passage from the novel: “And when [Ojiugo] returned [Okonkwo] beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week” (Achebe 29). Okonkwo’s refusal to abide by the customs set forth by Igbo Nigerian traditions during the Week of Peace demonstrates his fear of accepting any form of noncompliance from his wives and his children. By beating Ojiugo during the Week of Peace, Okonkwo shows disrespect towards Ani, the earth goddess. Considering that Ani is a female power, Okonkwo’s disrespect towards her reaffirms his disrespect towards the feminine, as also evident in the following passage: “But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for the fear of a goddess” (30). Okonkwo underestimates Ani’s power as the Earth goddess because she is female. However, this underestimation takes a turn when Ani exiles Okonkwo and his family from Umuofia for seven years. Even though Achebe often portrays the female subject in his novel as powerless, his
portrayal of Ani’s power as an Igbo goddess demonstrates that he does not hesitate to expose the limitations of the masculine ideal itself. After beating Ojiugo, Okonkwo is warned by Ezeani, a man sent by Ani to communicate to him that the evil he has done can ruin his entire clan. The words that Ezeani speaks to Okonkwo indicate that Okonkwo’s reason for beating his wife, Ojiugo, during the Week of Peace, is invalid. Ezeani tells Okonkwo, “Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her” (30). Thus, even the sexism that is inherent in patriarchal Igbo Nigerian customs shuns extremes, but Okonkwo’s insecurities do not.

Okonkwo’s seven-year exile from Umuofia serves as the main catalyst for his downfall, and this exile ultimately happens because of his disrespect towards the feminine. In “Achebe’s Work, Postcoloniality, and Human Rights,” Eric Sipinyu Njeng argues that within the setting of Achebe’s novel, the wellbeing of a clan comes at the cost of one of its members suffering for the entire clan. Njeng states that “it is the protagonist, initially portrayed in a sympathetic light as the custodian of African values, who must be removed in order that the society may adapt to a new era” (2). Okonkwo does not only embody these African values, but he projects his own ambitions onto his embodiment of these values. As a result of this, he is more likely than any other villager in Umuofia to be the scapegoat who is removed from the village so that other villagers can adapt to the era of British colonization. Njeng states that “Okonkwo’s weaknesses are all connected to the feminine; because he is afraid of the feminine in his father, mother, son and within his own heart, he destroys himself and saves society the trouble of stagnation” (5). Njeng’s argument implies that the village of Umuofia functions based on a codependency among its villagers. Therefore, the extremeness in Okonkwo’s beliefs have formed him into a threat against the wellbeing of Umuofia and because of this it is his suicide in the end of the narrative
which allows the other villagers in Umuofia to progress into the era of British colonization of Nigeria.

**Connections between Achebe’s, Adichie’s, and Atta’s Novels**

In her chapter, Strehle discusses the impression that the British colonizers held towards the colonized, and she connects this discussion to her analysis of male subjects in both Adichie’s and Achebe’s novels. Strehle references Fanon’s statement in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* that “the African was imagined by the West as soulless, subhuman, devoid of spirit” (150). The British colonizers were under the impression that the African people needed to be assimilated into British culture. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explores the presence of an inferiority complex within the soul of the African and the African diaspora. He argues that every colonized person in whose soul exists an inferiority complex has experienced this feeling because of the death and burial of their local cultural originality (18). Fanon describes the effects of assimilation on the colonized subject. He states, “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of his mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle” (18). In this passage, Fanon describes the colonizer’s view of the African man’s original state of the jungle status; and, according to this view, the whiter and more colonized the African man becomes, the more he renounces the culture and traditions of his mother country.

In Adichie’s novel, Papa Eugene’s character embodies the cultural conflict between Christian Catholic and Igbo Nigerian traditions. In her article, Toivanen states that “while Papa is represented as an admirer”, he is also “essentially a victim of modern European world views and values” as he is unable to make peace between his traditional background and his colonial education, and ultimately at one point in his life had to choose between the two backgrounds
(Toivanen 113). In contrast, Eugene’s sister, Ifeoma “embodies the virtues of cosmopolitanism” such as a combination of openness to a world that is beyond one’s own and firm attachment to local traditions (113). Whereas Eugene is a colonizing force who attempts to shape his children into colonized products just like himself, Ifeoma is a decolonizing force who reminds her children about their Igbo Nigerian roots while also making peace with the traditions of the British colonizers. Interestingly, it is the female characters, who men like Papa Eugene and cultural norms attempt to silence, that actually resist the epistemic violence of British colonialism against Nigerian religions.

There are several overlaps between the characters of Eugene and Nwoye from Achebe’s novel. In Achebe’s novel, when Okonkwo beats Nwoye and throws him out of the house, the narrator states that Nwoye “would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith” (152). If the plot of Achebe’s novel were to carry on into a sequel, Nwoye’s character would have come to resemble Eugene’s character in Adichie’s novel. For Nwoye to convert everyone in his family but Okonkwo to the new faith, Okonkwo would have to be absent, and therefore this passage implies that Nwoye would only dare to do such a thing after Okonkwo’s death. Okonkwo’s fear of his family converting to the new faith makes his character somewhat comparable to the character of Papa Nnukwu in Adichie’s novel. Okonkwo sees visions of his family converting to the new faith one day and these visions anger him. This is evident in the following passage from the novel:

He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man’s god. If such a thing were to happen, he Okonkwo would wipe them off the face of the earth. (Achebe 153)
The reference that Okonkwo makes to “the white man’s god” is comparable to Dube’s argument in which she argues that Eugene’s preference for his language of worship and liturgy to be English may suggest the belief that God must be white, and English must be a heavenly language (Dube 229). Whereas Eugene appears to equate the African belief system to the realm of evil, as argued by Dube in her article, Okonkwo appears to equate the culture of the colonizers to the realm of evil. Okonkwo has become angry to the point in which he imagines killing his entire family if they were ever to convert to the new faith. However, he does not live long enough, and with his death the path becomes clear for Nwoye to convert the rest of his family to the new faith. Had Okonkwo remained alive at the end of Things Fall Apart, he would likely have been a mirror of Papa Nnukwu in this regard. Whereas Okonkwo’s helplessness drives him to commit suicide in the end of Achebe’s novel, Papa Nnukwu’s helplessness regarding preserving his relationship with his son, Eugene, causes him to suffer until his death in the middle of Adichie’s novel. Although Achebe’s and Adichie’s novels represent two different periods in Nigerian history, the messages surrounding the aftermath of Achebe’s novel accurately foreshadow aspects of Nigeria’s future as depicted in Adichie’s novel.

In both Atta’s and Adichie’s novels, the friendships between female subjects are essential in confronting patriarchal obstacles. In Atta’s novel, Sheri encourages Enitan to discover her identity as a woman. She does this by teaching Enitan about the purpose and function of sexual intercourse, and in the process, provides her with a mirror to explore the inward appearance of her vagina. In Adichie’s novel, Kambili becomes startled when her cousin, Amaka, undresses in front of her. This is evident when Kambili describes her reaction to seeing Amaka undress: “Amaka put the comb down and pulled her dress over her head. In her white lacy bra and light blue underwear, she looked like a Hausa goat: brown, long, and lean. I quickly averted my gaze.
I had never seen anyone undress; it was sinful to look upon another person’s nakedness” (Adichie 117). The comparison in appearance that Kambili makes between Amaka’s nakedness and a Hausa goat demonstrates the absurdity that she finds in seeing someone undress in front of her for the first time. Kambili’s belief that it is a sin to look at another person’s nakedness shows how influenced she is by her father’s strong puritanical Christian beliefs. Although Kambili feels uncomfortable watching Amaka undress, this experience helps her to grow as a person especially if she were ever to share a room with another female in the future. In Atta’s novel when Sheri lends Enitan the romance novel, *Jacaranda Cove*, Enitan is immediately startled and imagines her mother punishing her, which indeed happens a couple of pages later in the novel. But before Enitan is punished by Arinola, she becomes fascinated upon scanning through the contents in the book. Rather than reading *Jacaranda Cove* from the first page to the last, she reads the last page directly after the first page of the book. Enitan’s experience in reading *Jacaranda Cove* is evident in her narration in the following passage: “In my bedroom, I read the first page of Sheri’s book, then the last. It described a man and woman kissing and how their hearts beat faster. I read it again and searched the book for more passages like that, then I marked each of them to read later” (Atta 36). Like Kambili, Enitan is initially resistant against discovering something outside of her usual beliefs, but the discovery that she makes is essential for her to learn about her own sexuality. Both Amaka and Sheri are subjects who rebel against patriarchy to encourage personal and sexual growth among young Nigerian women. Thus, in both novels, a bond exists between female subjects of different characters, and these bonds strengthen resistance against Nigerian patriarchal norms that constrain the rights and freedoms of women.
Conclusion

Although Nigeria gained freedom from European colonization in 1960, sexism within Nigerian patriarchy has remained unresolved for decades. Nigerian women have been deprived of the rights and freedoms to live a normal lifestyle, let alone contribute fairly to Nigeria’s economy. In Achebe’s novel, Okonkwo strictly controls his wives, and the slightest form of defiance from any of his wives triggers him to physically assault them. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe brings close attention to the toxicity created within an Igbo Nigerian village because of everyday sexism and misogyny. The gendering of crops to the gendering of human emotions have created a difficult lifestyle for not only the women in Umuofia, but also for the men. The men living in Umuofia are expected to embody strength as closely as possible and any failure to do so provokes brutal hostility towards them from other men in the village. It is the fear of being referred to as “agbala” like his father that pushes Okonkwo to exercise masculinity all throughout his life. However, it is this very obsession with masculinity that ultimately leads to his downfall in the end of the novel. Okonkwo’s friend, Obierika on the other hand who embodies many of the traits of masculinity that Okonkwo praises but not all, remains alive whereas Okonkwo commits suicide. The contrast between the individual outcomes of these two subjects brings to question whether one would rather suffer death for patriarchy or whether one would rather drift away from the culture they have known all their life for the sake of living a longer life.

In Atta’s novel, Enitan’s initial passivity upon witnessing the rape of her friend, Sheri, draws attention towards the real-life issue of rape victim blaming in Nigeria. The setting in Atta’s novel is more recent than the setting in Achebe’s novel and because of this the female Nigerian subjects in Atta’s novel have more rights and freedoms than the female Nigerian
subjects in Achebe’s novel. However, these rights and freedoms do not provide the Nigerian woman with adequate justice when she is wronged by a Nigerian man. In other words, despite Nigerian women gaining more rights and freedoms in the second half of the twentieth century, there remained a large disparity between the rights of Nigerian men and women. This is the reason why the three neighbourhood boys who raped Sheri are never directly brought to justice. Enitan’s blaming of Sheri for Sheri’s own rape brings to light a real-life issue in which Nigerian women are afraid to stand up for their female friends in cases of rape. Altogether, like many other Nigerian female victims of rape, Sheri has been shamed and silenced instead of being supported during such a difficult situation. It is this cruelty on not only Enitan’s part, but also on the part of the patriarchal Nigerian society, that triggers the plot in Atta’s novel.

In Adichie’s novel, Eugene embodies a dual personality as his identity within his household is completely different from his identity outside in Nigerian society. Although Eugene is a well-respected figure in Nigerian society, in his household he is an abusive tyrant who uses physical assault as a means of gaining compliance from his wife and children. Eugene’s cruelty towards his wife, Beatrice, and his daughter, Kambili showcase the cruel reality of domestic abuse that many Nigerian women experience to this day. Nigerian law focuses so much of its attention towards crimes that happen outside in the public sphere that cases of domestic abuse against women are often deemed as insignificant when brought before the law. Aunty Ifeoma resembles Adichie’s model of the radical feminist as she openly resists against patriarchy throughout the novel. It is Aunty Ifeoma’s influence which encourages Kambili and Beatrice to resist against Eugene’s torment until Beatrice succeeds in killing him. The aftermath of Beatrice’s murder in which her son, Jaja is punished in her place showcases the ongoing effects of patriarchy and sexism in Nigeria.
In all three novels written by Achebe, Adichie, and Atta, the rights of female subjects are constrained by sexism within Nigerian patriarchy. However, in every one of these novels there exists a female subject who rebels against patriarchy, and this female subject’s rebellion draws attention towards real-life issues in Nigeria that demand change. In Achebe’s novel, Okonkwo underestimates Ani’s power until he commits an inadvertent crime for which Ani exiles him and his family from Umuofia for seven years. During this exile, Okonkwo’s daughter Ezinma grows to possess the traits that Okonkwo always wanted to see in his son, Nwoye. In Atta’s novel, the teenage Sheri assists the novel’s protagonist, Enitan in discovering the world outside of her household. Despite initially betraying Sheri by blaming her for her own rape, years later the once timid Enitan rescues Sheri from an abusive polygamous marriage. In Adichie’s novel, Beatrice suffers in silence after Eugene physically assaults her and kills the child in her womb. This silence persists until Beatrice succeeds in poisoning Eugene to death. In all three novels, the female subject pursues various modes of resistance to take a stand against an issue that is not only hindering their individual rights, but the rights of all women in Nigeria. This paper has explored various issues that continue to take place in Nigeria due to sexism within Nigerian patriarchy. It has also analyzed how female subjects in different Nigerian novels have fought against issues that have threatened the rights and freedoms of Nigerian women. The outcome of the exploration and analysis in this paper demonstrates the importance of supporting Nigerian women today in eradicating any traces of sexism and misogyny remaining in twenty-first century Nigeria.
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