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**OKONKWO AND HIS MOTHER**  
*Things Fall Apart* and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of  
African Postcolonial Discourse

By Biodun Jeyifo

In the oral tradition, we often do not know whether the storyteller who thought up a particular story was a man or a woman. Of course when one examines the recorded texts, one might wonder whether a myth or story doesn't serve particular interests in a given society.

—Mineke Schipper

The Chielo-Ezinma episode is an important sub-plot of the novel and actually reads like a suppressed larger story circumscribed by the exploration of Okonkwo's/man's struggle with and for his people. In the troubled world of *Things Fall Apart*, motherhood and femininity are the unifying mitigating principles, the lessons for Africa and the world.

—Carole Boyce Davies

So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi*, and he told them stories of the land—masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell him, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children—stories of tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat... That was the kind of story that Nwoye loved. But he now 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.

—Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* [my emphasis]

Okonkwo's mother? Within the total narrative space of *Things Fall Apart*<sup>1</sup> there is only one direct, substantive mention of our hero's mother. As far as I know, this has never been formally registered in the extensive discussions and commentaries on the novel, let alone critically explored, and this seems quite consistent with the author's more evident interest in the complex, tortured relationship of Okonkwo with his father and, later in the concluding sections of the novel, with his son Nwoye. As Carole Boyce Davies remarks in the article from which the second epigraph to this essay was extrapolated, in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe's "primary concern is woman's place within larger social and political forces" (247) which are, in the order of things, the spheres of male initiatives and control.

And yet the single, brief mention of Okonkwo's mother is extraordinarily suggestive both for reading Okonkwo's particular brand of misogyny and neurotic masculinist personality and for analyzing larger questions of the author's construction of male subjectivity and identity in the novel. This "new" reading would indeed be a *re-reading* whose condition of possibility derives from the manifold feminist project that is such a decisive, perhaps the most decisive current of postcolonial critical discourse at the present time.<sup>2</sup> In this short paper, I shall examine this one substantive reference to Okonkwo's mother in fairly close detail, hoping to deploy this close textual exegesis as a bridgehead to a more general discussion of gender-related issues in the constitution of a postcolonial African critical discourse. I shall be arguing in effect that between Achebe's "under-textualization" of Okonkwo's mother and a feminist re-reading of the novel which would foreground her and relocate the "motherlore" she represents in the intense gender politics of the novel, we encounter an instance of the fundamental challenge posed by issues of gender in postcolonial criticism and scholarship. The point has been repeatedly made that the *nationalist* "master texts" of African postcolonial literature, *needed*, as the basis of their self-constitution as *representative*, canonical works, to subsume gender difference under the putatively more primary racial and cultural difference of a resisting Africa from a colonizing Europe.<sup>3</sup> By this occlusion of gender difference, Okonkwo's mother, his wives and daughters recede into the *ground* which enables the *figure* of Okonkwo and his father and son to achieve their representational prominence. But beyond this "programmatic" under-textualization of Okonkwo's mother, *Things Fall Apart*, as a powerful work of realist fiction, could not fail to inscribe the effects of sexual difference and gender politics within the very "over-textualization" of "men's affairs" in the novel, this being the social totality of the precolonial order as it comes into contact with the invading colonial capitalism. This has an important *political* lesson: national liberation in Africa, as long as it remains a historic agenda enforced by neocolonial dependency and arrested decolonization,<sup>4</sup> and as it is profoundly inflected by new post-nationalist discourses and cultural production, must reconfigure its founding moment as not irredeemably marked by an inevitable, *natural* sexism.

The allusion to Okonkwo's mother occurs in chapter nine of the novel; significantly, she is not named. The precise narrative moment seems, on the surface, of no particular thematic noteworthiness: three days after his participation in the ritual murder of the youth Ikemefuna, his "adopted" son, Okonkwo is just beginning to emerge from the emotional and spiritual trauma of that event. Characteristically, it irks him that he has indeed been weak and "unmanly" enough to have succumbed to the trauma. Indeed the whole episode lasts one short paragraph and can thus be quoted entirely:

For the first time in three nights, Okonkwo slept. He woke up once in the middle of the night and his mind went back to the past three days without making him feel uneasy. He began to wonder why he felt uneasy at all. It was like a man wondering in broad daylight why a dream had appeared so terrible to him at night. He stretched himself and scratched his thigh where a mosquito had bitten him as he slept. Another one was wailing near his right ear. He slapped the ear and hoped he had killed it. Why do they always go for one's ears? When he was a child his mother had told him a story about it.

*But it was as silly as all women's stories.* Mosquito, she had said, had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon she fell on the floor in uncontrollable laughter. "How much longer do you think you will live?", she asked. "You are already a skeleton." Mosquito went away humiliated, and anytime he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive. (53, my emphasis)

It is significant that in the very next sentence after this recalled story we are told: "Okonkwo turned on his side and went back to sleep." Like the mosquito bite which presumably worried his brief wakeful moment within a restful sleep only as a very minor irritation, Okonkwo's memory of his mother's stories in his childhood is very easily suppressed; and it is easily consigned to the domain of "silly women's stories." This seems quite consistent with the larger pattern of intra-familial and inter-generational conflicts elaborated in the novel: Okonkwo's relationship with his father, and later his relationship with his son, Nwoye, are foregrounded over relationships with his nameless mother, his wives, and his daughters. From a feminist perspective, this, more than anything else, reveals the male-centeredness of Achebe in this novel. While this is incontrovertible, it is only part of the story, and it barely scratches the surface of the complex and ambiguous gender politics of the text of *Things Fall Apart*. This point needs some elaboration.

As the third of the epigraphs to this essay indicates, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, unlike his father, does not succeed in completely repressing either the memory of *his* mother's stories, or their powerful, subliminal hold on his imagination and psyche. Consequently, he has to *feign* a "manly" indifference to this motherlore. Okonkwo, by contrast, seems to have succeeded completely in a willed amnesia of his mother's creative role in the formation of his personhood, his sensibility. Indeed the precise nature of this willed amnesia is awesome: while his father, Unoka, perpetually figures in both his psyche and his vigilant, conscious mind as an active, powerful (if negative) presence, Okonkwo's mother is assimilated into the neutral, abstract function of "mothers in general." For Okonkwo, his mother's stories and their significations evaporate into the generalized phallogocentric rubric of the "silliness" of motherlore. The catch in all of this is that neither this particular story, nor the many other women's stories given in *Things Fall Apart*, is silly; rather, in almost every instance, these stories are only deceptively simple and are usually of extraordinary emblematic, subversive resonance to the central narrative of Okonkwo's obsession with his father and his sons.<sup>5</sup> A close look at Okonkwo's mother's story and its narrative of the fractious, bitter liaison between Ear and Mosquito illustrates this point well.

Perhaps the most arresting detail in this story is the structure of reversals of gender hierarchy between the respective female and male personae in the tale. Thus Ear, the female persona, is the dominant, supercilious agent in the conflict. Mosquito, the male suitor, not only figures as an atrophied, diminished, "inadequate" phallus; the very manner and terms of his rejection strike deep: loss of vital powers unto death ("You are already a skeleton"! ). Since this tale is told by Okonkwo's mother and thus belongs in *motherlore*, we can surmise that Mosquito here encodes the male's neurotic fear of female power as the nemesis of male potency and life-force. Putative female superiority in this vertical structure is compounded by Ear's additional figuration in traditional mytholog-

ical anthropomorphism of the Body and its organs as *both* male and female, as Trinh T. Minh-ha tells us in her book, *Woman, Native, Other*:

...As a wise Dogon elder [Ogotemmel] pointed out, "issuing from a woman's sexual part, the Word enters another sexual part, namely the ear" (the ear is considered to be bisexual, the auricle being male and the auditory aperture, female.). (127)

The embodiment of abstract female power in this system of significations is particularly noteworthy in the way that it combines both "male" and "female" principles and their elaborated attributes and values. This, however, is a structure unperceived by Okonkwo and is indeed alien to his rigid, overliteral conceptions of the "masculine" ideals.

Is it of little or no consequence to the gender politics in the text of *Things Fall Apart* that abstract female power represented by the Ear and abstract male identity represented by the Mosquito are so vastly unequal in suppleness, vitality and resonance? In other words, is this story, told by Okonkwo's mother, and with all its powerfully resonating meanings, a mere narrative detail, a figural embellishment of the text bearing little relevance to the central conflict of Okonkwo's masculinist personhood which is lodged elsewhere, that is with the father and the Law of the Father?

There is absolutely no question that this tale of Okonkwo's mother, obviously drawn from the vast repository of motherlore, is centrally linked to Achebe's critical construction of Okonkwo's masculinist personality as this is conflictually played out, first with his father, then with his son. And this is all of one piece with the overabundant inscription in the novel of its protagonist's obsession with *maleness*, and his corresponding fear of, and suppression of *femaleness*. However, the major interpretive problem that we confront here seems to be that while *femaleness* as we encounter it in Okonkwo's mother's tale is a superior, stronger entity which confronts male identity with belittlement and insecurity, femaleness, as Okonkwo encodes it, is the exact opposite: weakness, fecklessness, cowardice, irresoluteness, sentimentality. In effect this means that in the light of Okonkwo's peculiar construction of "female" attributes, the personae of his mother's tale would be reversed: Ear would represent male superiority and Mosquito would represent female shrewishness. But this hardly resolves this issue, as long as Okonkwo operates as an isolated figure removed from the social context of his Umuofia community. Moreover, given Okonkwo's excessively literal phallocratic imagination, it would be as much of an absurdity to represent "maleness" by an orifice in the body as it would be to represent "femaleness" by the mosquito with its broomstick figure. Nothing reveals this crude, physical phallicism more than the fact that the gun, the machete, and the cudgel (for wife-beating and child beating), three over-literal extensions of an aggressive, neurotic masculinist identity, are Okonkwo's ultimate answers to any and all crises, and we see this in several incidents in the novel: the incident with the beating of his second wife during the peace week; the episode of the severe beating of his son, Nwoye, when the unhappy youth was spotted among the new community of Christian converts; and the climactic moment of the novel which results in Okonkwo's beheading of the first in the line of the advancing party of the hirelings of the colonial administration who had come to break up the village assembly at the end of the novel.

This problem of Okonkwo's negative transvaluation of female strength and superiority in his mother's tale to weakness and inferiority, however, disappears once we place Okonkwo in the context and nexus of his society's moral economy and symbolic codes.<sup>6</sup> This is a historically and culturally constructed context; it is a precapitalist, pre-feudal social formation in which, as amply demonstrated in Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters and Female Husbands*, "maleness" or "femaleness," the category "man" or "woman," do not operate as rigidly divided, biologically literal or ontological entities.<sup>7</sup> And Achebe's realist integrity renders this structure felicitously. Indeed *Things Fall Apart* not only has one of the most extensive and dense novelistic inscriptions of the *genderization* of subjectivity, signification and social space in postcolonial African fiction; the novel's overcoded inscription of the processes of en-gendering is massively fractured and ambiguous and cannot be read as a simple, unambiguous inscription of phallogocratic dominance. Let me cite only one composite group of these ambiguous inscriptions of gender and gender relations in the present context. Thus, on the one hand, Okonkwo's representation of "femaleness" as weakness and irresoluteness seems to have validation in the system of division of cognitive and perceptual categories in his society which ascribes the designation "female" to smaller crops like the cocoyam and the designation "male" to bigger crops like the yam, a system which also describes an "ochu" (abomination) as either "female" or "male" depending on the degree of threat or destabilization to the social order that it poses. But on the other hand, the same panoply of symbolic values and cognitive codes describes as "female" the most important deity in the religion and sacred lore of the community (Ani), making her priest *male* (Ezeani); conversely, the important deity of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves is "male" while his highest functionary is the *priestess* Chielo.

On a different but related note, it is important to stress the limits of a psychological reading of the relationship of Okonkwo to his parents and his sons and daughters which might fasten one-sidedly on his relations with his father and later with his son. It is indeed tempting to read an Oedipalization in the fact that almost everything that we are told about Unoka, Okonkwo's father, can be symbolically assimilated to the figure of the mosquito in the mother's story. By this reading, the driving fear of "femaleness" in Okonkwo's psyche is thus really both "guilt" for the father's fate of "mosquito" vitiation and eventual "death," and strong identification with and "possession" of the mother. But this is purely speculative and a rather sterile and fanciful, if fascinating, line of critical inquiry. Okonkwo both loathes the memory of his father and represses the lore of his mother; in the process he distorts both the "masculine" and the "feminine," by keeping them rigidly apart and by the ferocity of his war on the "feminine." His son, on the other hand, only *feigns* acceptance of this rigid masculinist code, but keeps alive the memory of motherlore in his conflicted, sorrowing consciousness. One crucial difference between father and son takes us beyond the purely psychological. This is the fact that the driving, all-consuming ambition of Okonkwo to be one of "the lords of the land," to take the highest title which only few men (and no women) ever manage to achieve within the course of several generations, this ambition in the service of material interests and social recognition of the highest kind, is absent in the son. Throughout the course of the novel, the evolving moral and spiritual sympathies of Nwoye move him away from such worldly sights to identification with the unprotected and "unprotectable" of his culture, those immiserated by the contradictory codes and practices of his society. We can indeed

say that within the gendered scale of valuations and representations by which Okonkwo seeks to establish the greatest possible distance between himself and his father's "effeminacy," his son Nwoye is "feminized": he refuses Okonkwo's interpellative call to be a "man" contemptuous of "female" attributes. This important distance between father and son is eloquently but succinctly captured in the economy of the following short passage:

The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine. But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul in the question of twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (103)

In the first epigraph to this essay, Mineke Schipper raises the important question of the gender(ed) provenience of stories and fictions in the precolonial oral traditions and the particular interests which such gender origins might serve. This question is at the heart of one of the major issues in African critical discourse at the present time: the project of reclaiming a separate, distinct tradition of African female writing and criticism which is not easily, indeed WILL NOT BE subsumed within the male-dominant tradition which, to date, has claimed to speak for the *whole* of African literary and critical traditions. It is impossible to take a full measure of this project without realizing that its objective is not merely to "correct" the stereotypes and misconceptions of the male-centered writers and critics, and not merely, in the words of the editor's comments in the *African Literature Today* issue on "Women," that African women now seek "to take their stand by their men,"<sup>8</sup> but rather to reclaim "women's stories" (herstory) from the void or repressed zones into which men and male-centeredness had consigned them. For just as the nationalist anti-colonial counter-discourse in literature and criticism once had to re-write and reinvent a *presence* that colonialist discourse, in its arrogance, imposture, and triumphalism, had theorized as absence, so also women writers and critics have to recover the submerged female tradition. What contemporary African feminist criticism at this level of self-authorization adumbrates is a return to *female* sources within Cabral's famous call for a return to "the source," or more radically, female sources as *the* source. In other words, the identification of creative female precursors or foremothers, and of discrete intertextual revision and influence between female and female-centered writers and critics, defines the most radical autonomization of gender difference in feminist African criticism at the present time. Particularly powerful instances of this expression are Chikwenye Okonjo's "The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," and an important essay by Florence Stratton which I now examine in the context of our reflections in this essay.

In "Periodic Embodiments: a Ubiquitous Trope in African Men's Writing," a trenchant critique of the male-dominant tradition of post-colonial African writing, Florence Stratton has uncovered, as few other feminist critical writings have done, the depth of the male-centeredness or phallocentrism of this tradition. According to Stratton, this male-dominant, male-centered tradition, given the fact and consequences of historic colonization, has been largely constructed around woman as the "embodiment" of the male writers' vision of the new African nation in all its changing historical experience, from colonial humiliations and anti-colonial struggles to the postcolonial agony of neocolonialism and virtual recolonization. Furthermore, Stratton avers that in making these "periodic embodiments" of woman as ideal symbol and representation of the nation, male writers have basically assumed that man is the visionary, the artist, the maker of the history of the nation, and woman the sign (of national or racial integrity, resistance and sovereignty) mobilized by male creativity, initiative, and revolutionary will. Perhaps the most telling point of Stratton's forceful argument in this article is the view that this deeply phallocratic assumption goes beyond its usual identification with the conservative current of the anti-colonial and postcolonial African male writer's idealization of woman as repository of cultural "essence," (what Stratton calls "the pot of culture" syndrome). Beyond this mostly Negritudist romantic-nostalgic idealization, Stratton also assimilates male writers of a more radical anti-imperialist, even anti-sexist vision and sensibility like Sembene or Ngugi, to this whole tradition of "periodic embodiment." This critique in effect implicates virtually *all* male African writers and critics.

What this line of polemic and projection indicates is, I believe, that feminist criticism, even when it critically engages and contests both imperialist domination and post-independence misrule in the context of the postcolonial state, will not be content with how women are positively depicted by certain "progressive" male writers, that is with regard to "accuracy," "sympathy," or "solidarity" with female oppression and resistance to it. The stakes, it seems, are much higher: women are no less visionary and creative, and no less makers of history and shapers of experience than men; "woman's issues" will no longer be subsumed into a supposed "broader" framework of national or racial collectivity defined and legitimated by men. And perhaps Stratton's most provocative thesis in this article is the implicit, sub-textual *uterocentrism* of her suggestion that men's denial or erasure of women's initiative and power is a product, and a projection, of a fundamental male anxiety and insecurity about femaleness and its putative *primal* connection to creativity.<sup>9</sup> By the light of this particular uterocentric critique of *all* male writers and critics, we have to look beyond the so-called strategic, programmatic suspension of gender difference in the name of a unified resistance to foreign *racial* domination for the deeper causes of that marginalization of women, as characters, writers, and critics, which enabled the constitution of postcolonial African literature and critical discourse as an engendered tradition. We also have to go beyond the excuse that colonial educational policies being what they were, women simply weren't there in that great moment of "awakening" when modern African literature and critical discourses began to stake their claims against outright European colonialist disavowals and "post-imperial" neo-liberal condescending universalism.<sup>10</sup> The deeper, more daunting cause, Stratton suggests, is perennial male anxiety and fear of femaleness as *the* source of creation and creativity. While I think we should ultimately reject this uterocentrism and the considerable obfuscations and mystifications to which it could give rise, I suggest that there are

eminent political and hermeneutic considerations which demand that we do not simply dismiss it out of hand. Again let us turn to our re-reading of Okonkwo and his mother for a brief elaboration of this point.

Okonkwo's repression of motherlore that I have examined in this essay and the significations embedded in his mother's tale of the Ear and the Mosquito would seem to support this thesis of deep-rooted male insecurity about and fear of female power and creativity, with the corresponding need or will to tame it, domesticate it, marginalize it, and project it as the gift and vocation of a few "exceptional" women who are thus, like Chielo in *Things Fall Apart*, "honorary men." It would thus seem that the need and impulse for men to "colonize" women, to identify with the "master" subject position elaborated in Hegel's famous master-slave dialectic, runs very very deep and is reproducible across different social formations. It is in connection with this problem that the discourses of African feminist writing and criticism on "a double yoke" and "a double colonization," where African women's creativity is concerned, poses a great challenge to male writers and critics. We must remember that no colonization is ever given up easily, voluntarily, in "a fit of absent-mindedness."

It remains to state that for this radical feminist critique to be an effective intervention in postcolonial African critical discourse, it is important to disentangle biological, literal *maleness* from male-centeredness or phallocentrism as this involves elaborate signifying, perceptual and representational orders which make man the center and ground of reason, intellect, and will. One is born *into* and not *with* these codes already in place in the genes, and one has a choice either to, on the one hand, enter unproblematically, willingly, or opportunistically into them or, on the other hand, begin to study them, understand them ever more fully and consciously and help to destabilize or overthrow them. What Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie once said about women and biology applies equally to men:

True, the biological identity of a woman counts and is real. But woman, contrary to what some men [and most] think, is more than "a biological aperture," as Anais Nin said. Woman's biology is indeed an important and necessary aspect of her, but it is not all she is and it should not be used to limit her. (5)

The distinction that Lacan makes, as Gayle Rubin informs us, between the "function of the father" and a particular man who embodies that function is useful here: particular men may refuse to embody and actualize this function as phallocratic values define and consecrate that function.<sup>11</sup> If, as Nancy Chodorow has argued, "mothering" is reproduced by technologies of gender erected by patriarchy as it combines with different modes of production, no less is "fatherhood" so produced and reproduced, even if as the more privileged term of a patriarchal relational structure. Nwoye's memory of his mother's stories, his preference for "women's stories" and his merely feigned and not actual acceptance of a phallocratic erasure of motherlore all reveal the possibility of a breach between maleness as biology and maleness as either a consenting, or a resisting response to the interpellations of neocolonial, patriarchal neocapitalism.

This last point opens up for critical inquiry and research priorities the over-determined spaces in which both female creativity and transformative initiative, and the divergent male responses to them, are played out. Okonkwo, as we have seen, struggles against

colonial conquest and a nascent imperialist domination, but with an aggressively masculinist personality and its deep alienations. Largely on account of this contradiction, his resistance is futile. This point has an emblematic pertinence to present antinomies of postcolonial critical discourse, for what Okonkwo could not have perceived we have inherited: colonial definitions and codifications of rights, duties and responsibilities not only divided colonizers from the colonized, but they also separated surrogate “native” rulers from their “native” subjects and “native men in general” from “native women in general.” African male-centered writers and critics should take this lesson to heart as they create a “national” literature which, if not a mere appendage, a mere extension of metropolitan European traditions, is nonetheless imbricated in deeply gendered alienations and reifications whose genealogical roots go back to colonialism.

This lesson applies equally to Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, who, although he symbolically disavows the national-masculine ethic that is embodied in his father’s personality and doomed resistance, nevertheless goes over to the colonizers and more or less embraces the colonialist ideology of the “civilizing mission.” It is not overstating the case to observe that his “feminization” does not lead him to an adequate, critical comprehension of the invading colonial project: the historic separations consummated by colonial capitalism divided fathers and sons and “native” men from “native” women; but it also separated arriviste “assimiles” from the rest of the “native” population and a small but structurally significant group of middle-class women from their subaltern, disenfranchised “sisters.”<sup>12</sup>

Even though its most important project lies elsewhere—in constructing a tradition of women’s creativity in orature and literature with roots going back to precolonial society—it is a permanent task of feminist literary criticism and scholarship to contest and delegitimize the “under-textualization” of women and “women’s affairs” in the mostly male-authored writings which claim to speak on behalf of the “nation,” the continent, the “Black world.” An ancillary task in this respect is the interrogation of the appropriation of “woman” as idealized “embodiment” of male-authored and male-centered myths and fictions of national resistance or racial pride: women’s bodies will no longer passively bear the marks of opportunistic, mystifying idealizations which help to obscure the oppressions and wrongs done to real women. In this paper I have argued, rather self-consciously as a male, leftist critic, for a task to complement, not “complete,” these projects of contemporary African literary-critical feminism(s): the uncovering of such divergent, conflicting constructions of “maleness” as we have identified in Okonkwo and his son, Nwoye, in *Things Fall Apart*. The motivation behind this enterprise bears restating: to reconfigure the nationalist silencing and repressing of gender difference as deeply fractured, bearing the very marks of this repression in the failures and contradictions of national liberation in the postindependence epoch in Africa. This reconfiguration allows us to re-write national liberation as a historic phenomenon with a greater complexity in issues of gender and gender politics than a benighted, categorical phallogentrism.<sup>13</sup> This is underscored by Carole Boyce Davies’ words in the second epigraph to this essay: “In the troubled world of *Things Fall Apart*, motherhood and femininity are the unifying, mitigating principles, the lessons for Africa and the world.”

This “lesson” apparently eluded Fanon’s otherwise penetrating critique of the ideology of the national liberation movement in Africa as evidenced in the celebrated text titled

“The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” the most widely debated chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*. In that text, Fanon’s desperate and prophetic warnings mostly addressed class and ethnic contradictions of nationalism, and it registered a deafening silence on questions of gender. But Fanon’s critique does not exhaust the intellectual legacy of radical, insightful criticisms of national liberation in Africa. We have also, among others, the legacy of Cabral and the liberation movements of the Portuguese ex-colonies. Lars Rudebeck, in his seminal work on Cabral and the PAIGC, *Guinea-Bissau: A Study in Political Mobilization*, has written:

In the final analysis, Cabral seems to have viewed the anti-imperialist struggle very much as a cultural struggle—as a people’s struggle to reconquer its right to a place in history...The most important specific example of cultural struggle possible to discern within the total struggle and distinguishable from the school system is probably the systematic emphasis given by the PAIGC to the problem of female emancipation. This does not mean that the struggle for female emancipation is not integrated with the total struggle, nor does it mean that it is not an important part of the general educational task of the schools. It only means that this problem has been considered important enough in its own right to be singled out for specific attention in the concrete political practice of the PAIGC. (225)

*Things Fall Apart* occupies, if only in a fractured, ambiguous manner, a similar conceptual, ideological space of radical nationalist ideology in Africa. And it is a space which has been considerably expanded in postcolonial African fiction, by Achebe himself in *Anthills of the Savannah*, and by other male writers like Ousmane Sembene, Nuruddin Farah, Femi Osofisan and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Indeed, it is the accumulated energy of this entire tradition that powers the savage satirical indictment of the sexual exploitation of women as a fundamentally constitutive part of the callow, boastful collective masculinist identity of the arriviste, compradorial bourgeoisie of neocolonial Kenya in Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross*. Male critics and theorists who wish to seriously engage feminism must critically reclaim this tradition.

#### Notes

1. *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958). All subsequent citations are from this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.
2. This is to be measured primarily in the number and quality of critical interventions by women in postcolonial debates of the last decade and a half. This “feminization” of the discipline, however, exceeds mere body count; its major effect has been to make us re-think some of the ruling concepts and paradigms of the field of postcoloniality: “nation” and “canon,” representation and subjectivity. This essay is an initial attempt to productively engage aspects of these interventions.
3. On this point it is instructive to re-examine the documents of the two historic “Negro Writers Conferences,” Paris, 1956, and Rome, 1959. Present at these conferences were the most prominent African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean writers and intellectuals, predominantly male, many of whom were later to become the core of the political and intellectual elites of Africa, the Caribbean and post-Civil Rights Afro-America. It is now widely accepted that the perspectives authorized, and the agenda defined by these two conferences were decisive in the constitution of nationalist and Pan-Africanist postcolonial discourses, but with scant recognition of how deeply gendered and male-

dominant these were. In the "Proceedings" of the Paris Conference there is a photograph of the participants; out of some fifty-five persons, only one is a woman. The "Proceedings" of the Rome Conference lists some sixty members of a rather large "Executive Council" (of the "Society of African Culture" instituted by the Conference) of which only three are women. The 1956 documents in fact contain a "Message from the Negro Women" which is remarkable only in how unremarkable it is. The strong suspicion that it was probably drafted by some of the male organizers of the conference is reinforced by the obvious factitiousness of sentiments in the "message" like the following: "Can you cite a single *Negro man of culture* who in his writings has not exalted the Negro woman, the Mother"? The *Negro man of culture* was the then current Francophone-derived term for the African, African-American and Afro-Caribbean artist and intellectual considered as a "representative" of the race. The documents from these conferences and the tropes and topoi of discourse they inscribed and enshrined for a long time consolidated the "representative" figure of the postcolonial artist, intellectual or nationalist statesman as ineluctably male. See *Presence Africaine* (1956, 1959).

4. On the subject of arrested decolonization see Jeyifo, "The Nature of Things."
5. Barbara Harlow in *Resistance Literature* deploys one of these "women's stories" in *Things Fall Apart* as an "allegory for an African strategy for independence" (xv).
6. On the notion of a "moral economy" see James C. Scott (1976).
7. I hasten to add that this thesis is not uniformly applicable to all of precolonial African social formations. The feudal and semi-feudal centralized states of the Sahel and the Western Sudan obviously entailed considerable division and hierarchization of gender differences. Indeed Ifi Amadiume errs in more or less generalizing her thesis to all of African societies and cultures.
8. *Women in African Literature Today* (2).
9. There is of course an extensive, elaborate critical and theoretical discourse on the metaphorization of the womb as *the* ultimate site of creation and creativity, far more potent and superior to typical male-originated metaphors of creativity. The following exhortation from Anais Nin is representative: "All that happens in the real womb, not in the womb fabricated by man as a substitute... woman's creation far from being like man's must be exactly like her creation of children, that is, it must come out of her own blood, englobed by her womb, nourished by her own milk. It must be a human creation of flesh, it must be different from man's abstraction." Consider Trinh T. Minh-ha's comment on this statement of Anais Nin: "Man is not content with referring to his creation as his child, he is also keen on appropriating the life-giving act of child-bearing. Images of men 'in labor' and 'giving birth' to poems, essays and books abound in literature. Such an encroachment on woman's domain has been considered natural, for the writer is said to be either genderless or bisexual" (37). On this *uterocentrism* I have two comments to make, rather self-consciously as a male critic: First, uterocentrism courts, and even sometimes embraces, the occultation of gynocritics considered as a perceptible female aesthetic. Secondly, however, it is not impossible for this mystique to coexist with very progressive, socially conscious works of literature, theatre or film. Nana, the matriarch of Julie Dash's acclaimed *Daughters of the Dust*, says: "the ancestors and the womb, they are the same." This connects with the strain of the over-mythologization of history and memory in the film, a strain not incompatible with the film's equally powerful secular and de-mythologizing exploration of the violent clashes of the contending sacred narratives and epistemologies in the Gullah community.
10. Achebe's critique of neoliberal universalism in "Colonialist Criticism," dated as a timely response, a contextual intervention at the originary moment of the "Commonwealth Literature" rubric, remains pertinent. See his *Morning Yet in Creation Day*.
11. Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex."
12. On this point consider the fact that the "sisterhood" which binds the griot woman, Farmata, to Ramatoulaye, the middle-class protagonist of Mariama Ba's novel, *So Long A Letter*, is compounded by strong structures of class and caste inequalities. For the influence of colonial French education on Mariama Ba's views on women and education, see Riesz.
13. For very informative analyses of national liberation and gender politics in various locations in the Third World see Evelyn Accad, "Sexuality and Sexual Politics: Conflicts and Contradictions for Contemporary Women in the Middle East"; Angela Gilliam, "Women's Equality and National Liberation"; and Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran," all in Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. See also Cobham.

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