

The Gender Roles of *Things Fall Apart*

In every culture, there are many different roles that must be fulfilled by the members of its society. One such role, arguably the most prominent, is gender. Gender roles are demonstrated to people as soon as they become a part of this world. The ways people treat newborns according to their sex greatly influences the process of teaching a child the articulate workings of a culture. Girls and boys alike learn a set of behaviors, attitudes, responsibilities, and rights in accordance with their specific sex. When these attributes of enculturation are applied specifically to a male or female, gender is created, and is then associated with different expectations that correlate with their culture. *Things Fall Apart*, written by Chinua Achebe, takes place in an Ibo village in Nigeria, a culture that is no exception to this societal norm. Through the telling of Okonkwo's story of his life and his clan, it is precisely demonstrated just how a society creates and fulfills roles for both of the sexes. The gender roles of men and women of the village of Umuofia are clearly defined through their division of labor, the attitudes that shape their gender constructs, and the relations that exist between men and women.

Perhaps one of the most conspicuous tools used to identify the gender roles of a society is through the analysis of its division of labor. The division of labor is primarily split up according to age and gender. It specifies the tasks that are required of each sex, demonstrates a society's expectations, and defines the overall roles that people must live up to as being members of that society. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Ibo village has a division of labor that is greatly influenced by gender. Like in many other societies, the women of Umuofia do lots of work that centers on cleaning, food preparation, raising children, and other types of household chores, just as the men do much of the heavy labor, farming, and fighting for and defending their clan as needed. For instance, during the Feast of the New Yam, as a part of the preparations, the women "scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light" (37), before painting the walls with colorful designs. On top of this, the women are also expected

to prepare meals for their husband and children. In one example, Okonkwo, the main character, comes home, expecting a hot meal and a warm hut, or *obi*, and instead finds an empty, cold *obi*. This discovery “provoked (Okonkwo) to justifiable anger” (29) in which he later took out on his wife. This scenario demonstrates the role that Okonkwo’s youngest wife, Ojiugo, had in his household, regardless of the fact that she did not satisfy it. However, not all of the food preparation is designated to the women of Umuofia. It is split among both genders with a specific set of responsibilities for each. Each gender harvests different types of crops (the men harvest yam, and the women harvest coco-yams, beans, and cassava), however the men are usually the ones butchering the animals, while the women do the rest of the preparation. During a celebration called *uri* (in which a woman’s suitor pays off her bride-price), men and women alike contributed to preparing goats to feast on. After the men had slaughtered the goats, “they washed them and cut them up for the women who prepared the soup” (114). Aside from daily tasks, when it comes to supporting a family, the people of Umuofia have responsibilities that are not unlike many other cultures. The women are tasked with producing, raising, and caring for children, and the men are responsible for providing food and money for their family. A big part of the men’s role is producing yams, a very important crop in the Ibo village. The book says, “Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed” (33). Division of labor is something that is present in all societies. While there is often times similarities from one culture to the next, ultimately each one is unique and creates roles for men and women alike that end up complimenting each other. These roles and duties give great insight to the inner workings of how a society functions as a whole.

Unlike the lack of subtlety surrounding the division of labor, another aspect that helps accent the gender roles in a society are the attitudes implemented from enculturation. These attitudes contribute by shaping the gender construct and passing these ideas from one generation to the next. In Umuofia, these attitudes reflect the gender roles of their society. One of the most prominent attitudes

is that women are of lesser importance than men, but all of this is not to say that women do not play an important role. In this Nigerian clan, women are viewed as weak, and weakness is very much looked down upon. For example, as a young boy, Okonkwo came to the understanding that “*agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title” (13). A man without a title, otherwise known as a failure, is referred to by the same name for a woman and overall demonstrates the underlying attitude concerning women and weakness. Another great example is that crimes are classified by two different categories: male and female. After Okonkwo accidentally shot another clan member, the book says of his crimes, “Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent” (124). This exhibits the ideas of the Ibo clan suggesting that women are gentle and good-intentioned, whereas men are seen as tough and fierce. On that topic, another significant value through-out the Ibo clan is one concerning masculinity. Masculinity is expected from the men in this clan, and is a necessity if a man desires recognition and status. Achebe writes, “To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength” (28). Men grow up in Umuofia learning that strength, alongside masculinity and violence, all go hand-in-hand. Nwoye, Okonkwo’s eldest son, listened to his father’s stories about bloodshed as he was growing up, and learned “that it was right to be masculine and to be violent” (53). Through the gender construct, this idea of masculinity is applied to all aspects of Ibo life, including how women are treated by men, in particular, their husband. It states in the book, “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (53). All of these ideas and attitudes emphasize the gender roles present in the Ibo clan. These underlying, discreet attitudes give way to a gender construct that significantly affects a society in the most intricate manner. Overall, it helps shape a culture and the customs, traditions, and norms within it, a complex contribution to the way their society functions as a whole.

The attitudes of the Ibo clansmen and clanswomen are very revealing of the gender roles that define their society. However, the analysis of the gender relations between men and women can be just as critical, if not more so, to understanding the depth of the gender roles in their clan. By taking a close look at how men and women of Umuofia treat each other, the roles each gender lives up to allows insight of the status, prestige, and power associated with them. An examination of the actions of the Ibo people establishes an inequality between men and women, men being seen as the more dominant gender. First and foremost, there is a quite obvious patrilineal descent system recognized through-out the society. Okonkwo says, "I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family" (74), in which his friend, Machi, replies, "That cannot be. You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children" (74). Their conversation goes to show how deeply their patrilineal descent is imbedded into their society. Men also have the right, unlike women, to gain titles of prestige through-out their lifetimes, whereas the only title a woman will achieve is *agbala*, the same as an untitled man. Men also become a point of reference in identifying a particular woman. Instead of saying the woman's name, they may simply say "Okonkwo's wife" or "Nwoye's sister," a cultural norm that sheds light on where women stand in Ibo society. Regardless, a true looking glass into the relations of men and women lies in the customs of marriage. In Umuofia, polygamy is the norm and truly successful men will be wed to multiple women. To begin the whole process, there is a bride-price set for a particular woman that the man must compensate for in turn for her hand in marriage. From that point forward, a man's wives are there to serve his needs, including bearing children. During a wedding that Okonkwo attends, the father of the bride-to-be, Obierika, says, "She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town" (117). This is an implication that the women's greatest duty is to bear sons so that the father's lineage can be passed down for generations. Perhaps the most astounding aspect of the gender relations of Umuofia is that women must be controlled. During a wrestling match, Achebe writes of Okonkwo, "He trembled with

the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman" (42). The wife, or wives, or an Ibo clansmen are viewed as assets that help determine the status of that particular man. A woman that acts out or disobeys her husband might end up as a reflection of the man himself, thus lessening his prestige in their society. A result of these very clear gender roles is a social divide between the men and women. Each gender's responsibilities are not often mixed. When a ceremony was held for the *egwugwu* to settle a dispute, Achebe states that "it was very clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (87). Though this particular ceremony was very prestigious and dealt with the "most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan" (88), there are many other demonstrations of the divide between men and women. Regardless, the women are still respected for the roles that they do play. Evil Forest, an *egwugwu*, sums it up by saying, "It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman" (93). In this particular Nigerian clan, the relationship between men and women is eye-opening. It demonstrates exactly how the specific gender roles of the Ibo clan work together to form a high-functioning society. Furthermore, it proves to be a great tool in the analysis of gender roles and through this analysis, can provide a greater, more objective worldview.

Things Fall Apart author, Chinua Achebe, demonstrates through his writing just how deeply enculturation imbeds gender roles into a culture. Through division of labor, the attitudes that surround and apply to the gender construct, and the relationship between men and women of Umuofia, the gender roles present in their society become clearly defined. Overall, these factors offer an insightful examination that can be compared to other societies across the planet and used to gain an open-minded worldview. Gender roles play an impressive part in any society, whether it is in a small group of nomadic foragers or cities containing millions of industrialists. The process is always the same, and despite the variations in results, it can be promised that once all is said and done, both genders will have a concise constellation of roles that they are expected to fulfill.