

“This is What a Man Does”: Disconnecting Systemic Practices Harmful to Women
From African Cultures in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

by Madeline Wagner

“Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives...lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children” (13). In telling *Things Fall Apart* broadly from the perspective of a cruel character like Okonkwo, feminist critics of Chinua Achebe perceive a failure on Achebe’s part to confront the misogyny and gendered violence in his works until later in his literary career. For example, Ana Maria Fernandez compares Achebe’s misogyny to Joseph Conrad’s racism; Rose Ure Mezu argues that Okonkwo’s narrative grossly misrepresents the masculine Igbo culture as one with casting irrelevant roles to women; Datta Sawant, in examining descriptions of Achebe as sexist, inconclusively finds that Achebe presents conflicting images of himself in both writing from Okonkwo’s perspective and offering condemnations of his perspective. Critics of Achebe such as the aforementioned deftly identify the existence of one, misogynistic voice in *Things Fall Apart* — Sawant coming the closest to interpreting a second, contradictory voice — but all fail to recognize the ways in which the text has multiple, contradictory voices in dialogue and consonance with one another.

This paper aims to prove the ways in which current, popular assessments of Achebe’s early literature fail to comprehend what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the *polyphony* and *heteroglossia* present in the text. Polyphony — the presence of multiple, conflicting voices acting as a united chorus in a text — as well as Heteroglossia — or the dialogue between the intentions of the character and the intentions of the author — present themselves in *Things Fall Apart* by way of the fundamental difference between the dangerous intentions of Okonkwo toward women and the dual reparatory work of Achebe to condemn Okonkwo and uplift Igbo culture.

In support of Bakhtin’s theories of multivoicedness and multiplicity of intentions, this paper provides textual examples of Achebe counteracting and condemning Okonkwo’s depreciative actions in Ezinma and Uchendu’s narratives, as well as the ways in which Achebe connects the violence endured as a result of polygyny to patriarchal control rather than to Igbo culture. Having disproven the critique that Achebe’s early works do not address the women’s issues present in the texts, this paper then concludes by conceding the danger of nonetheless providing a platform for a harmful narrative such as Okonkwo’s.