



## Marginalization in Chinua Achebe's Short Stories

\*Amit Maruti Bamane

### Abstract:

*Marginalization is a social process by which a person or a group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the fringe or edge of society. It mostly occurs to a group of people sharing common features like race, sex or age. Economic, cultural, social and political factors work together to make certain groups in society feel marginalized. Multiculturalism claims that women should have the same rights and the opportunities as men. The women like Akueke, has no free will to choose her life-partner. In Girls at War, the story is based on the Nigerian- Biafran civil war. It highlights how women rejecting the monopoly of men participated in the war. At the end of story, Gladys risks her life as she tries to save the maimed soldier in the bombing raid, she gets caught by the explosions during her attempt to save the maimed and dies.*

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Marginalization is a social process by which a person or a group of people are made marginal or become relegated to the fringe or edge of society. It mostly occurs to a group of people sharing common features like race, sex or age. Economic, cultural, social and political factors work together to make certain groups in society feel marginalized. Marginality is an experience affecting millions of people throughout the world. Marginalization detaches a group of people or an individual from social relation preventing them from full participation in social activities. One such example of marginalization is the marginalization of women. This paper is an attempt to explore the Igbo culture and to discuss women as a marginalized in Chinua Achebe's short stories.

Being excluded from economic, social and political means of promoting one's self – determination can have adverse effects for individuals and communities alike. People who are marginalized, have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them; they may become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end of negative public attitudes. When people are marginalized, they are pushed aside by society and thus are made powerless and deemed unimportant and excluded from many of the benefits of society because they seem not to be contributing much to that society.

\*Asst. Professor, Dept. of English, Smt. Kusumtai Rajarambapu Patil Kanya Maha Islampur, Tal: Walwa, Dist: Sangli. (M.S)

Chinua Achebe is the major exponent of the modern African novels and short stories. His short story collections are *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1962), *Civil Peace* (1971), *Girls at War and Other stories* (1972). His writings reflect the tragic consequences of the African encounter with Europe, the conflict between traditional and religious and modern secular mores. Legal systems in West Africa are greatly affected by the customary laws. The various facets of Multiculturalism can be found in the writings of the novelists and short story writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ben Okri, Adewale Maja Pearce, Zaynab Alkali, etc. West African Writers have drawn the attention of the world on the predicament faced by their natives and they have portrayed the different traits of African heritage through their writings.

First story *Akueke* highlights how patriarchy and traditions ruled and put Akueke in worst condition. Akueke is the only young girl child among her six brothers. She is loved by all these brothers. In this short story, Akueke doesn't break any taboo. When she rejects the proposals of marriage, not only her neighbours but also her own brothers blame her. Actually her own conscience does not allow her to select any of the bridegrooms. She becomes despair. As a result, Akueke suffers from neurotic disease. But, it was said that she suffered from 'swelling disease'. Actually she loves her brothers, but she is not ready to sacrifice the dignity of women and rights of women. She felt completely shocked and shattered by the strange behavior of her lovable brothers. Being stricken with the incurable disease, she is kept in 'the bad bush'. Luckily, she gets survived and comes to Ezi by leaving Umuofi. Being helpless, she had to leave her brothers and village. It was really a very humiliating and disgraceful experience for Akueke. Nevertheless, she doesn't collapse and confronts with the situation and proves that she is the girl with a lot of self-respect and a desire for independent action. She revolts against the formalism and hypocrisy. She wants to emancipate herself from all the shackles of age old traditions.

In the village Ezi, her grandfather's village, Akueke gets a new name and identity. Her decision to go to the maternal grandfather's village resulted fruitful. Though she goes through many bad experiences at every stage of her life, she is at last rewarded with the fulfillment of her most cherished desire and begins to feel blissfully happy. She acquired new identity and new life-journey. As the story is set in the traditional Igbo society, the women like Akueke didn't get much freedom in the Igbo society. Though her brothers had sympathy and love in their mind for their only youngest sister, they had no other alternative than to cast her in the "bad bush". She was left in the appalling condition. Women, as a property and other, are subjected to violence. It is significant that the earth Goddess Ani doesn't punish her brothers for leaving her in 'the bad bush' and in such a tragic situation.

This shows how women were maltreated in the contemporary Igbo society. The women like Akueke, has no free will to choose her life-partner. Rather, they are relegated by patriarchal society. She is left to the margins and rejected her own identity. Her grandfather gave her new identity she is

named as ‘Matefi’ which was the name of Akueke’s mother. The grandfather said to her brothers that “Akueke was to become his daughter and her name would become Matefi. She was no longer a daughter of Umuofia but of EZi. .... “As for your purification rites you may carry on because Akueke is truly is truly dead in Umuofia”<sup>1</sup>

Neither Akueke nor her brothers dare to question the traditional laws of the Igbo society. If a girl rejects some proposals of marriage, she is considered rude and egoist and kept at a subsidiary place. She is labeled with a ‘swelling disease’ and because of unwillingness to conform to the accepted code of conduct and values. Though Akueke was escaped from the bad situation by her grandfather, again her fate was handed over to a man (grandfather). Consequently, she was trapped again in the patriarchal culture. Here she has no free will but is restricted by the Patriarchy.

Second short story *Girls at war* effortlessly created the horrors of war by focusing on the relationship between self-deluded Gerald Nwanko, a Biafran Officer from Ministry of Justice, and Gladys, once an idealistic volunteer fighter who is now a desperate yet defiant survivor.

This surfaces the moral as well as economic corruption of the civil servant during Biafran War. Achebe puts forth the warlike situation in Nigeria. In this war, not only men but women like Gladys also took initiative spontaneously. “That was in the first heady days of warlike preparation when thousands of young men (and sometimes women too) were daily turned away from enlistment centers because far too many of them were coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defence of the exciting new nation”.<sup>2</sup>

In Contemporary African society, the participation of women in war was unusual for African people. People, elites, and officers like Nwankwo were making sharp comments on women’s participation in the war. In those days; women were relegated to the margins. “The prime Joke of the time among his friends was the contingent of girls from a local secondary school marching behind a banner: WE ARE IMPREGNABLE!”<sup>3</sup>. This shows how the educated people were also stricken to the traditional views and patriarchy. Women’s bearing arms in hands and marching was a humour for African natives in those days.

*Girls at war* is an attention grabbing story in which Gladys comes across the authentic picture of tradition stricken African society. Gladys serves as a fighter in Civil Defence and becomes a proponent of Equalism in the African society. She bears arms and participates in the war. She does her duty with devotion. When Nwanko realizes Gladys’s devotion in her work, he feels very sad for his taunts about the participation of women in the war. “But after the encounter at the Awka check point he simply could not sneer at the girls again...”.

This shows the callous attitude of egoist natives regarding women. They didn’t show any sympathetic attitude at the women who were prepared to sacrifice their lives following patriotic ideals

for the country. Reginald Nwanko was surprised when he encounters Gladys, whom he told during their first meeting that “to go to school because girls not required in the Militia” as a member of Civil Defence.

The African elites, contractors, attack traders exploited every situation for self-benefit. The modern elites left the country in the tragic situation. They led the nation into disaster. They received the piles of money for food. But the common people suffered a lot. They were dying of starvation. On the contrary, the modern elites and officers were indulged in celebrating birthday parties. At one place the friend of Nwanko, a Lieutenant-Colonel, arranged birthday party. “There was goat meat, some chicken and rice and plenty of home-made spirits”. And at the other place, common people waited for food packets, milk, clothes, etc. There was a chaotic situation created by this war. This contrastive scenario has been depicted by the writer. The common villagers were relegated to the margins by these elites.

According to F. Odun Balogun, “the treasonable corruption and immorality of military elites like Captain Joe, intellectual elites like Cletus and business elites like the “attack traders” are responsible for the height of patriotic idealism to the depth of moral corruption and materialism”<sup>3</sup>. Even Nwanko collected precious food stuff to sustain his own family he didn’t feel guilty while boldly storing that food stuff in front of the eyes of many starving people. He loaded his trunk with milk, powdered egg and oats and tinned meats and stockfish. With the beginning of war, things have gone out of control. “Death and starvation having long chased out the headiness of the early days ...”<sup>4</sup>.

In this story, the life of Gladys is mortgaged to the dominant patriarchal culture, a basic agency of female oppression and exploitation and marginalization. In fact, she wanted to show her love and patriotism for the country, but she couldn’t move ahead because of the critical situation during the war. Nwanko, a representative of Patriarchal culture, makes critical remark on women’s bearing arms in hands. Gender discrimination is also a vicious tendency which causes numerous problems to the ‘Second Sex’.

Under such a critical situation, Gladys has become what she has become in order to survive. Actually, at the opening of the story, Gladys is a devoted fighter to the country. But as the situation become worst, she had to lose her ideal views and morality. Ideologies are lost in the wake of its destruction. As Nigeria had stopped the supply food, clothes and all the necessities, common people were dying due to starvation. Nwanko took undue advantage of his power. Even he exploited Gladys. She needed support and sympathy. He appropriates her for day and night. He failed to see the consistency of her behavior in an inconsistent world whose values have been shattered.

The center of this story is ‘women’ and the writer depicted how women’s aspirations blighted in each case by the contemporary Nigerian Society and prevailing circumstances that trapped them. For the sake of their country, they bear arms in hands, it shows their patriotism and their readiness to sacrifice

life is noteworthy. The African society is organized along predominantly male rules. At the Lieutenant-, Colonel's party one of the red cross people declares in a drunken state that a fellow worker has died for nothing. Not for this stinking place..... Even these girls who come here all dolled up and smiling, what are they worth? Don't I know? A head of Stockfish, that's all, or one American dollar and they are ready to tumble into bed".

Such was the callous attitude about women in contemporary African community. Women were kept at a subsidiary level and always considered a material thing. For Nwanko, whatever the drunkard man vomited was the bitter truth. Nwanko specifically held women responsible for the decay. Nwanko feels, "Gladys was just a mirror reflecting a society that had gone completely rotten and maggoty at the centre". Such was the nonchalant approach of male rule about women in African social inequality existed in respect of women.

In Igbo philosophy of life, male and female were complement to each other. There was a harmony between Feminine and Masculine. But with the advent of colonizers, this harmony was disturbed. Women were undervalued by the contemporary patriarchal society. The feminine principle in the Igbo society was weakened. At the time of third encounter, Nwanko sees Gladys as 'a Fighter' "patching up with civil defence". But very soon she realizes the futility of her efforts. She misrepresents herself before Nwanko due to the poverty and starvation. She submitted herself to the lust of Nwanko.. She had to maintain illicit relationship with him. She submitted herself to the lust of Nwanko. Due to the war, she didn't get the opportunity to bloom her career. But at the end, Gladys completes her duty as a fighter. She saved the maimed soldier by putting own life at stake.

Gladys's devotional spirit for the sake of her country inaugurates a feminist move towards equal rights and respect to all irrespective of their gender, class, and community. Female protagonist in Achebe's short stories are seen to be in search of self- fulfillment, order, meaning, security, amidst the confusions uncertainties of life. Men are no longer seen as enemy, but society, norms, customs, and traditions continued to be regarded as hampering the growth.

This story is based on the Nigerian- Biafran civil war. It highlights how women rejecting the monopoly of men participated in the war. This is a sign of better development of African Society in future and is encouraged to adjust to the changing scenario of the world. Gladys is a representative who tried to change the outlook of the contemporary African society. Women had been culturally conditioned to accept an artificially constructed inferiority. Patriarchal law is instilled into the child during a period of socialization. Through these short stories, Chinua Achebe has brought before the world the African Patriarchal view. Both Akueke and Gladys overthrew the traditional views of the society. In modern world, women want to overthrow the exposed traditions and conventions that hindered their progress. They want to disclose the so far concealed and repressed strength and ability.

Women must attack Patriarchy to achieve liberation and must strive to get economic, legal and political structures of society in their hands.

Women empowerment is a prerequisite for creating a cultured society. Since many centuries women are trapped in a circle by Patriarchy. But, today they have proved their potential and efficiency in every walk of life. There is an emerging need to promote women empowerment among especially the rural women. We see that women bear almost all responsibility for meeting the basic needs of the family and the society, yet systematically denied the resources, information and freedom of action. Though women work on higher ranks, they are considered inferior. They are not given due recognition.

All cultures are valuable, but the validity and authenticity of each culture depends on how much that culture secures the basic human rights irrespective of gender and caste. As a girl, Akueke is made a prey of injustice, marginalization, dispossession and gender discrimination. Male domination and social justice pushed here into the pit of isolation and suffering.

Multiculturalism claims that women should have the same rights and the opportunities as men. Women should be freed from the set of man-made rules of dominant cultures. This man-made distinction on the basis of gender, caste, etc. are always hazardous for social harmony, equality, and unity. In these short stories, all the principles of multiculturalism have been violated. Akueke, never gives up attempts though she knows that her life is in danger. Her efforts to strive for a new social order are praiseworthy. In *Girls at War*, at the end of story, Gladys risks her life as she tries to save the maimed soldier in the bombing raid, she gets caught by the explosions during her attempt to save the maimed and dies. She gets a heroic death. Gladys is a woman who opted to stand out among other downtrodden women, playing ostensibly the men-role.

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