

a real man in Igboland.”⁷⁵ Thus, it is within this context that we may also understand Okonkwo’s preoccupation with success and the acquisition of wealth in *Things Fall Apart*.

But, while Achebe’s novel is not typically understood as depicting the achievement of womanhood or the significant role of women in Igbo society before colonization, scholars point out that despite the patriarchal nature of Igbo society, a dual-sex system of leadership existed among the Igbo before the advent of colonization. Some Igbo communities were matriarchal and as such inheritance was through the mother. In some areas, women with titles often married younger women who became surrogates and bore children for these titled women and their families. In general, scholars acknowledge that colonization marginalized African women by removing them from political and social positions that they had held in precolonial society.

Under the dual-sex system that existed in traditional Igbo society, women controlled specifically identified spaces and areas of the public, such as the markets, the worshipping of certain deities, and certain social ceremonies. Achebe attempts to represent some of these instances where women exercise power. For instance, despite his maleness, Okonkwo is punished and must flee from his clan because he has committed a female crime, a crime against the earth goddess. Importantly, it is to his motherland that he must flee for safety. When he is punished very early in the novel by Ezeani, the priest of Ani, it is because he has also offended the earth goddess by beating his wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace.

Additionally, in the scene where Chielo carries Ezinma to the shrine of *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, Okonkwo, who “ruled his household with a heavy hand” must stand aside for the priestess.⁷⁶ When he follows the priestess, he follows her only from a “manly” distance, but Chielo outruns him because “Chielo was not a woman that night.”⁷⁷ She has transformed into the embodiment of the supernatural. Even when Okonkwo eventually arrives at the mount of the shrine of *Agbala*, Okonkwo does not dare to enter it. *Agbala*, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves is male, but it is served by a powerful priestess named Chielo. During the days of Unoka, Okonkwo’s father, the priestess similarly “was a woman called Chika, [who] was full of the power

of her god, and she was greatly feared.”⁷⁸ During Okonkwo’s time, it is Chielo, who is likewise feared by Okonkwo.

These are just a few of the moments when Achebe attempts to represent women in positions that are not subordinate to those of the men in their society. Nigerian literary scholar Abiola Irele notes this tension in Achebe’s representation of women’s status in his novel, when he says that “the subjugation of women as a social practice is compensated for by the high valuation of the feminine principle in the symbolic sphere—the awe and respect accorded to Chielo, the priestess of *Agbala*, illustrates the institutional inversion of gender role and status she embodies at this level.”⁷⁹

This duality in humans—or simply within Igbo cosmology—helps to maintain balance in society or in the universe. For although women are marginalized in the political and social arenas presented in the novel, the society is governed by a value system that nonetheless accords tremendous power to the feminine principle. During Okonkwo’s exile in his mother’s homeland, Uchendu, Okonkwo’s youngest uncle, draws Okonkwo’s attention to the stature that the society accords women by explaining why “Nneka” (mother is supreme) is “one of the commonest names we give our children.”⁸⁰ As Uchendu explains, “A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you.”⁸¹

Historically, the [Aba Women’s War](#) of 1929, during which hundreds of Igbo women marched against the British administration and the local warrant chiefs in protest against colonial taxation, stands out in Nigerian history as representing the birth of Igbo women’s political resistance to colonization and indicates women’s ability to exert political influence in the Nigerian context.

Key Characters

Okonkwo

Okonkwo is the central character or protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. Actions in the novel revolve around him. His tragic flaw is his fear of becoming like his father Unoka, whom he sees as feminine and lazy. Consequently, he is obsessed with assertions of masculinity or manliness and acts hastily. He be-