

WOMEN OBJECTIFICATION, EXCLUSION AND DENIAL OF AGENCY: A TRANSITIVITY ANALYSIS OF ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* THROUGH MILLS LENS

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the ways through which women agency is denied through objectification and exclusion in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. The study is based on mixed method approach. It is primarily qualitative but quantitative data has also been added to validate the findings. The study incorporates Sara Mill's Feminist Stylistics along with Michael Halliday's concept of transitivity to analyze the novel. The findings reveal that certain types of transitivity choices in Things Fall Apart perpetuate male centric worldview. The transitivity analysis of selected clauses shows that agency is associated with male members of the society as they are involved in material actions. Female are devoid of agency while becoming goal in material processes. They are associated mostly with mental processes even in these processes their faculties are either suppressed or monitored through male lens. This study can be further extended on the feminist stylistic and transitivity analysis of Chinua Achebe's other works.

Key Words: Feminist stylistics, transitivity analysis, agency, Chinua Achebe

1. Background of the Study

Chinua Achebe's *Things fall Apart* is a widely acclaimed novel in postcolonial and African Studies. It has great relevance in historical and cultural studies. The novel also offers a rich site for gender based linguistic analysis which is the focus of present research.

Sara Mills states that language constructs gender. In *Feminist Stylistics* she argues that transitivity choices like other linguistic choices offer a wide range of meanings in relation to context and environment which is one of the main concerns of feminist stylistics. She further claims that these linguistic choices reinforce gender bias and gender specific ideologies Counting the ratio of these transitivity choices on a syntactic level reveals the extent the characters in a particular text are passive victims of circumstances or active participants, making significant contributions, taking bold actions and making decisions (Mills, 1995, p.144).

The concept of transitivity analysis is introduced by Michael Halliday in 1960's. He believes that language is a system or network of choices where each choice represents a particular context and environment. The focus of transitivity analysis is to uncover who is the actor (practicing agency) and who is acted upon (becomes the goal). Such type of analysis is based on clauses to examine actions and participants. In this way transitivity choices reveal a worldview where language, ideology and gender are interrelated (Mills, 1995, p.144, p.143).

The transitivity analysis of *Things Fall Apart* through feminist stylistic lens uncover the ways linguistic strategies contribute in positioning the female characters as passive victims , objectified

and silenced. They are denied agency. On the other hand, men are involved in material actions practicing their agency, power and dominance.

2. Literature Review

In “Re-Imagining Gender in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”, Christopher Anyokwo, emphasising the importance of the balance between the male and the female principles, re-reads and re-interprets gender relations in *Things Fall Apart*.

In “Achebe and his Women: A Social Science Perspective”, Merun Nasser asseverates that Anglophone African writers in their writings have often portrayed women in a subservient role. He argues that Achebe, one of the most important and well-known Anglophone African novelists, has not done much to represent women properly in his novels.

In “Sexual/Textual Politics: Representation of Gender in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*”, Saba Shouq states that Achebe has given more significant space to and emphasis in representing his male characters in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe took such a stance, she opines, because of the overtly androcentric nature of the Igbo society where a man was all-important and where women played a subservient role.

Research Gap: This research fills a gap in literature by offering a new perspective of Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* while incorporating both transitivity and feminist stylistics.

3. Research Methodology

The study is based on mixed method approach. It is primarily qualitative but quantitative data has also been added to validate the findings. The study incorporates Sara Mill’s Feminist Stylistics along with Michael Halliday’s concept of transitivity to analyze the novel. In order to conduct analysis, the researchers have chosen specific excerpts from the novel where both men and women were involved because such excerpts align with the purpose of research. Then selected excerpts were broken into clauses to identify transitivity processes types. These findings are further interpreted through Sara Mills’s lens to identify patterns of gender bias, women objectification, exclusion and lack of agency. The transitivity analysis focuses on how Achebe’s language choices unmask gender specific ideologies, absence of women agency and their objectification in male centric Igbo society.

3.1 Statement of the Problem

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* builds an interesting web of gender and power through linguistic choices that, when analyzed through Sara Mills’s and Michael Halliday’s integrated theoretical framework, unmask how Igbo patriarchal ideologies are perpetuated, positioning language as a tool of women objectification and exclusion.

3.2 Research Question

The overarching question of the present research is:

- ✓ How do transitivity choices in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* perpetuate male centric ideology?
- ✓ In what ways female are linguistically silenced and objectified in *Things Fall Apart*

3.3 Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research are following:

- To bring to surface the ways black women are objectified and silenced in Igbo society.

- To incorporate Sara Mills' feminist stylistics and Halliday's Transitivity to analyze *Things Fall Apart*

3.4 Delimitations of the Study

The present research is on a very small scale. It is delimited to very brief selected excerpts from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Sara Mills's Feminist Stylistics aims to examine a wide range of features such as naming, modifiers, focalizations and transitivity choices etc. This study is further delimited to only transitivity choices.

3.5 Significance of the Study

This study can be fruitful not only in gender studies but it also signifies the wider value of linguistics methodologies into feminist literary criticism. Because it offers a unique perspective in applying a combined theoretical framework of *Mills' Feminist Stylistics* and Halliday's *Systematic Functional Grammar* to analyze Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. By incorporating transitivity analysis framework with feminist stylistics tools, this study unmasks the ways women are linguistically positioned, objectified and marginalized.

4. Data Analysis

Objectification of Women and Exclusion: A Transitivity Analysis

Mills claims that language can turn women into commodity. She further asserts that transitivity choices and grammatical structures erase female agency. The linguistic structures objectify women which reflect their culture where men enjoy subjectivity, power, agency and dominance.

Excerpt 1 : “Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had found fame as the greatest wrestler. He was the wealthy farmer and had just married his third wife” (Achebe, 1958, p.8).

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstances
A	Material	Actor: He (Okonkwo)	had found	Goal: Fame	Role/identity: as the greatest wrestler
B	Relational (Identifying)	Token: He (Okonkwo)	was	Value: the wealthy farmer	
C	Material	Actor: he(Okonkwo)	had married	Goal: his third wife	Just: time

The transitivity choices of the above excerpt as elucidated through Sara Mills's feminist stylistic lens show a male centric worldview where male characters are represented with agency and identity, while female characters are both linguistically and culturally silenced and objectified. The transitivity analyses of these clauses typify a wider stylistic motif wielded by the novelist to objectify women without names and voices and only with their male relationships. The material processes here glorify and celebrates Okonkwo's success in strength, wealth and polygamy. The material process in clause A represents Okonkwo as the actor and agent who gains fame through his physical strength. The identifying process in clause B equates Okonkwo with social identification which again reinforces male dominance. The transitivity choice in clause C *had just married his third wife* exemplify grammatical objectification of women. Okonkwo is the actor and third wife is the goal. The material process in this clause positions the woman in passive role without any agency. However, she is also listed with material wealth, fame and status. This

unmasks how patriarchal ideologies are linguistically perpetuated through grammatical choices in fiction which in Mills terms reinforce male actions and identities while silencing and objectifying female.

Excerpt 2: “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man” (Achebe, 1958).

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant
A	Relational (Attributive)	Carrier: a man	was	Attribute: prosperous
B	Material: Negative	Actor: he	Was unable to rule	Goal: his women and children
C	Relational: (Identifying)	token: he	was not	Value: really a man

The transitivity analysis of these clauses suggests that Okonkwo has internalized Igbo patriarchal idea of toxic masculinity. Achebe seems to criticize this idea of toxic masculinity. Okonkwo’s obsession with ruling his wives results in making tragic incidents. He becomes violent towards his wife during the week of peace and killed his beloved boy Ikemefuna.

The transitivity analysis in Clause A assigns the attribute *prosperous* to a man which indirectly excludes women from the same measure of judging any person’s worth so prosperity in men is the norm and same in women would be deviation. The sequence in the clauses A and B maintains the same ideology where deviating from the norm for not being able to rule women and children delegitimizes masculinity. The Clause B is an example of grammatical possession, reducing women **to** objects owned by men/ruled by men. Moreover, the material process *to rule* also reinforces the idea of authority rather than mutual respect in the sacred institution of marriage. The inability *to rule* on household can result in losing masculinity so personal wealth is not sufficient to define masculinity. In Mills terms this linguistic hierarchy positions men as authoritative and women and children as objects and subordinates. The Clause C turns this toxic masculinity into conditional masculinity not something fixed. The valued category *not really a man* erases his masculine identity. Moreover, women are again excluded from this valued category so they are again linguistically positioned as other and subordinate.

Excerpt 3: “This meeting is for men. The man who had contradicted him (an embedded clause with Material Process) had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman” (Achebe, 1958, p.25).

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
A	Relational: Attributive	Carrier: This meeting	is	Attribute: for men	

B	Relational: Possessive	Carrier: the man	had	Attribute: no titles	
C	Material	Actor: who(the man)	had contradicted	Goal: him(Okonkwo)	
D	Verbal	Sayer: he	had called	Verbiage: him a woman	that was why

The transitivity choices in the following clauses seen through Mills lens again demonstrate how language built up patriarchal logic. The gender based exclusion is normalized through grammar in Clause A. The relational attributive process defines access in the meeting (a public sphere) exclusively to the men. The transitivity choices in Relational Possessive clause B assigns masculinity to social titles. And a man without titles lacks cultural criteria of manhood. This again suggests that masculinity is not a biological fact rather a cultural construct. The material process in Clause C constructs his material action as transgressive as he has challenged a man who possesses titles. The verbal process in Clause D reinforces misogyny. Femininity is not only excluded and delegitimized from public spheres rather it is associated with inferiority, weaknesses and deep insult. Moreover any deviation from the fixed norms of masculinity is unacceptable.

Excerpt: 4 “In this way Akueke’s bride price was finally settled at twenty bags of cowries. They huggle and bargain as if they were buying a goat or cow in the market” (Achebe, 1958, p. 68 & 69).

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
A	Material: Passive voice	Goal: Akueke’s bride price	was settled	No explicit actor. But implicitly only men are involved.	At twenty bags of ccowries (of extent/result
B	Material: Transaction al action	Actor: They (men)	huggle and bargain		as if they were buying a goat or cow in the market(of comparison and simile)

The transitivity analysis of these clauses bring to light how the moment of bride price in the novel reflect the ways the cultural norms, language and traditions normalize women objectification. The clause A is constructed in passive voice to put focus on the bride’s price rather than actors. In Mills terms this deliberate stylistic choice reflects bride’s objectification in negotiations and erases bride’s agency. The lexical choices of *huggle*, *bargain*, *marketplace* and *livestock* in the material process of clause B contextualize business and commodification and undermine the sacredness of marriage. The economic simile in the hypothetical relation blurs the boundary between people and property. It further reveals that women are not considered human subject rather objectified as animal to be sold and exchanged. Bride is dehumanized. The argument over bride’s price reduces the bride to a form of currency (cowries) among men with the total exclusion of women in the

discussion. The exclusion of women in the discussion again suggests that women are passive in traditional customs and men are the agents. In these sentences, bride is the object to be sold and exchanged and men are the agents to perform the action of buying and purchasing. So women are both grammatically and socially acted upon not acting. In Mills terms language is used as a tool to unmask how language hierarchy maintains and propagates gender bias.

Excerpt 5: “These women never saw the inside of hut, they never did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No Woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan. Okonkwo knew the secret of the egwugwu and never spoke of it, even to his wives. He went into his obi, where he kept his titles, and made decisions” (Achebe, 1958).

Clause	Transitivity: Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
A	Mental (Perception)	Sensor: These women	saw	Phenomenon: the inside of the hut	never (frequency/negation)
B	Mental (ellipsis)	Sensor: they(women)	did (<i>see</i> is elided (left out but understood)		Never (again frequency/negation temporal)
C	Material process	Actor: They	scrubbed and painted	Goal: outside the walls	Under the supervision of men
D	Mental Process (Imagination)	Sensor: They(women)		Phenomenon: what was inside	
E	Material process (Action)	Actor: They	kept	Goal: Their imagination	to themselves
F	Verbal Process (asking question)	Sayer: No women		Verbiage: questions Target/recipient : the cult	Time: <i>Ever</i> (negated by <i>No woman ever</i>) — a temporal adverbial.
G	Mental Process (Cognition)	Sensor: Okonkwo	Knew (indicate knowledge)	Phenomenon: the secret of the egwugwu	

H	Verbal	Sayer: he (elliptical)	spoke	Of it (content i.e. the secret)	<i>Never</i> – Circumstance of frequency/negation. <i>even to his wives</i> – Circumstance of recipient (who the message is directed toward)
I	Material	Actor: He	went	Goal: Location: into his obi	
J	Relational Process (Possessive /Attributive)	Carrier: he	kept	Attribute: his titles	where
k	Material	Actor: (he implied again)	made	Goal: decisions	

The transitivity analysis of these A to J clauses reveals that most of the time women are represented with mental and verbal processes and limited times with material processes. And almost all the time they are denied to think, to ask and to perform something significance. Their material actions are superficial, manual (scrubbing/painting) and conducted under the supervision of men. They are deliberately denied access to the sacred space// forbidden knowledge i.e. *Obi*. Women's mental faculty exists but is repressed and outward expression of such speculation is either forbidden or highly monitored. The elliptical clause B is repetitive and emphatic. Women's verbal silence is ideologically loaded with gendered silence, prohibition and agency. So obi, a sacred space rooted in both physically and symbolically with patriarchal power and authority imbued with traditional norms. Titles represent patriarchal and political power, prestige and status. The transitivity choices in the form of men involved in material and relational processes suggests that the novelist subtly seems to put emphasis on male agency and authority with the total denial of female agency and power. So the feminist stylistics and transitivity analysis reveals how language reinforces sexism in society.

Excerpt 6: "Remember that if you don't answer truthfully, you will suffer or even die at child's birth," she began. "How many men have lain with you since my brother first expressed the desire to marry you?" (Achebe, 1958, p.124)

Clause	Transitivity : Process Type	Participant	Process	Participant	Circumstance
A	Mental process (cognitive)	Senser: you(implied subject)	Remember	Phenomenon: that if you don't answer truthfully.(Emb	

				edded Clause: what is being remembered)	
B	Verbal Process	Sayer: you	answer	Verbiage: (implied whatever the answer is)	<i>truthfully</i> Circumstance of manner (how the process is done)
C	Mental	Senser: You	will suffer		Circumstance of Time: <i>At child's birth</i>
	Material (a part of compound predicate in clause C)	Actor: you	Will die		<i>At child's birth</i>
D	Verbal	Sayer:	began		
E	Material Process	Actors: Men	Lain with	Goal : you	How many: implied extent (number of times/people)
F	Mental /Verbal	Senser/ Sayer: My brother	first expressed	Phenomenon /target: the desire to marry you	<i>Since</i>

Mills claims that language reproduce male centric ideology not only by men but also women through internalization. The verbal processes in these clauses are formed in the form of interrogation, threat, warning and commands. The purpose is to exert control on women. Although the sayer is a woman but she has internalized patriarchal ideology. The tone of these verbal processes seems to be of guilt and confession. There is an obsession with women's virginity at the sacred occasion of marriage in Igbo patriarchal society. Instead of giving value to mutual relationship the focus is on woman chastity secured for the man. Moreover, her virginity is being measured with patriarchal timeline (the day she was proposed) not with her own decisions. In case she told lie she will die at child's birth. That is the fatal result for women who lost virginity and broke cultural norms. Although the speaker/Sayer who tries to control the sexuality of another woman is also a woman but she got that authority because of her relationship with the male member of her family i.e. her brother.

Quantitative Summary of Transitivity Analysis of Selected Clauses

Process Type	Frequency	Percentage
Total	28	100%

Material	12	42.86
Mental	6	21.43
Relational	6	21.43
Verbal	4	14.29

The cumulative transitivity analysis of selected clauses shows that there is an unequal gendered distribution of agency in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* which supports patriarchal ideology. Material processes are in abundance in these clauses where men are the actors which reinforce their role as agents of authority, status and violence. On the other hand, female are either the goals or the receivers of actions without agency. The transitivity analysis further shows that women are mostly involved in mental processes where their intellectual faculties are suppressed.

5. Conclusion

The transitivity analysis of the selected clauses reveals how linguistic choices are intricately tied to the construction and reinforcement of gendered power dynamics. Material processes dominate the data set (42.86%), indicating a narrative emphasis on action, dominance, and control—traits traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity. This aligns closely with the ideological underpinnings of the text, where masculinity is defined through physicality, social authority, and aggression. Relational and mental processes (each 21.43%) further expose how identity and internal states are framed in gendered terms. Relational processes often present manhood as conditional, linked to social markers like titles, control over others, or exclusion from female-associated traits. Mental processes, though less visible, contribute to shaping how characters perceive themselves and others within a patriarchal structure. Verbal processes (14.29%) play a significant role in policing gender norms—as seen when femininity is weaponized through insults like “a woman,” reinforcing the notion that being female is a mark of weakness or inferiority. Through Sara Mills’ feminist stylistic lens, the analysis uncovers how language not only reflects but enforces patriarchal ideology. Femininity is devalued, masculinity is hierarchized, and deviation from these norms is punished or silenced. Ultimately, this transitivity-driven approach reveals how grammar itself becomes a vehicle of ideological control, shaping both identity and social order in the text.

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