

[Achebe's Female Characters, NeMLA, March 2017](#)

Announcement published by Thomas Lynn on Thursday, August 18, 2016

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

September 30, 2016

Location:

Maryland, United States

Subject Fields:

African History / Studies, Colonial and Post-Colonial History / Studies, Social History / Studies, Women's & Gender History / Studies

Assessing the Women of Achebe's Fiction

Please submit proposals through the Northeast Modern Language Association (NeMLA) website: <https://www.cfplist.com/nemla/Home/cfp>. The panel number is 16135.

Some readers of Chinua Achebe's fiction have questioned the Nigerian author's respect for women. None of the protagonists of the first four of his five novels are women, and while the fifth, *Anthills of the Savannah*, unfolds a substantial portrait of Beatrice Okoh, she is only one of the book's three central figures. Furthermore many of Achebe's female characters are subordinated and degraded. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, the protagonist, Okonkwo, beats one of his wives, Ojiugo, and shoots his rifle at another, Ekwefi. And the fact that Okonkwo has three wives is perfectly normal in the culture in which this novel is grounded. In Achebe's next novel, *No Longer at Ease*, Hannah Okonkwo, the mother of protagonist Obi Okonkwo, threatens to kill herself if Obi marries the woman he loves, Clara Okeke, while other women offer themselves sexually to Obi so that he will arrange scholarships for them. The third novel *Arrow of God* focuses at length on many characters, none of them female, and in the fourth, *A Man of the People*, two of the women are pawns in a political and sexual competition. Rarely do we see females with authoritative voices in the larger social sphere. Does this mean that Achebe views women as weak or without enough intrinsic interest to warrant sustained focus in a book? Or do Achebe's portrayals of women attest to their strength and intelligence while reflecting, in multiple cases, the reality of their sexualized and subordinated status in their cultural milieus? What are other ways of understanding Achebe fictional women?

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