



Representation of Masculinity in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: Chinua Achebe's magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* is renowned for its authentic account of African people and their Igbo culture. This acclaimed novel deals with strong patriarchal ideals of masculinity within the Igbo culture. The present study will focus on the varying interpretation of masculinity within the Igbo culture. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, turns to be the major focus of study who tries to maintain all the traits of masculinity with his physical power, wealth, authority and violence. Masculine traits are glorified throughout the novel while the feminine traits are vilified as docile, foolish and weak in the novel. Thus, this paper depicts how masculinity varies throughout the novel in Umuofia and Igbo culture.

Keywords: Masculinity, Femininity, Igbo Culture, Tradition, Patriarchy.

China Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* is often considered as his masterpiece which was published in 1958. Achebe has divided the novel into three parts and depicted the life of African people before colonialism and their life after colonialism. In the beginning of the novel, Achebe has precisely described the life of Okonkwo and the Igbo culture. In the middle of the novel, Okonkwo and his family are exiled to his motherland, Mbanta and the Christian missionaries arrive in Africa. Towards the end of the novel, things fall apart for the Igbo tribe and they become colonised. The colonists gain influence on the Igbo people, their religion and their land which results in a downfall of the Igbo culture and their tribe. However our focus in this present study lies upon the varying interpretation of masculinity in the different parts of the novel.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* depicts traditional Igbo life, which centres around gender roles. In general, sex is biological while gender is social. Biological traits usually categorise human beings as female sex or male sex. In terms of gender every traditional and patriarchal society lays down some specific rules which divide men and women. Men and women have different socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities for themselves. In a traditional and patriarchal society men are supposed to be authoritative and women should follow them submissively. Men should only express one emotion which is anger and other emotions should be suppressed. Women are not supposed to get angry and possess a soft behaviour. Men are the leaders and women are their followers. Men should possess all masculine traits whereas women should have all the feminine qualities. The Igbo society also had these structured gender roles as it was both traditional and a patriarchal society. It laid emphasis on masculinity. The concept of masculinity in broad terms can be defined as a social construct that encompasses "the behaviors, languages, and practices, existing in specific cultural and organizational locations, which are commonly associated with men and thus culturally defined as not feminine" (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001, 15-16).

The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo is extremely concerned with being masculine. He devalues everything which is feminine and hates every person who is weak. In the beginning of the novel, Okonkwo in a village meeting criticises a man without a title by referring to him as a woman which illustrates how much Umuofia society values masculinity when classifying individuals. The reason behind this behaviour of Okonkwo is his late father, Unoka. Unoka was a lazy and a improvident man. He was unable to support his family and owed a heavy amount of debt to many people. "When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt." (7) Unoka was frequently referred to as an "Agbala,". Generally "Agbala" is a word that refers to a woman but in Umuofia it is a derogatory term for a man who has not taken any titles. Due to Unoka's reckless behaviour, Okonkwo hated his father and was ashamed of him. Growing up, Okonkwo never wanted to be like his father and he was successful in doing that by achieving many things from a young age. Okonkwo was proud of his achievements as he had taken two titles, had three wives, ten children in total and was a wealthy farmer with two barns full of yams.

In Umuofia even the crops are gender specific. Crops like coco-yams, beans and cassava are women's crops whereas Yam is a man's crop and is considered as the king of crops. Okonkwo from an early age started going yam crop because he thought that the women's crop which his mother and sister grew with hard work were unable to fend them as a family. This shows how from a young age seeds of masculinity were sown in his mind. Growing up he decides to be as masculine as possible in front of his family and his whole clan.

Okonkwo controlled everyone in his household with anger and violence. He did not show love, care and gentleness for his family members. He believed that a man should only demonstrate his strength and not his emotions. As a result he used his strength and anger on his family as well. His wives and little children were very afraid of his fiery temper. Okonkwo firmly believed that “no matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man” (50). This is why he would always talk down to his children and wives in order to demonstrate that he is the authoritative figure in the family, and if anyone questioned this, he would beat them.

Once he even beat his second wife because he thought that she had cut down the whole tree but in reality she only cut down some banana leaves from the tree. When she tried to explain this to him; he became so angry that “Without further argument Okwonkwo, gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping” (37). After this beating incident, Okonkwo planned to go hunting. When he heard that his second wife “murmured something about guns that never shot” (37). Okonkwo felt that it was an insult to him and his hunting skills which were very poor in reality but to maintain his masculinity; he shot her with his gun. As his aim was poor his wife didn't get hurt but she trembled with fear. This shows how Okonkwo liked that his family should fear him and never talk back to him. During the week of peace he beat his youngest wife because she had gone to her friend's house to plait her hair and she got late in cooking the afternoon meal. This demonstrates how Okonkwo maintained his masculinity and took pride in beating his wives.

Okonkwo was not even compassionate towards his children. In fact, he was disappointed with his eldest son, Nyowe because he was not as aggressive as his father. Okonkwo told him stories which were full of war, violence, and bloodshed so that his son would be more masculine. He was so afraid of being called weak that when the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves of Umuofia decided to kill his adoptive son, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo participated in the killing. Although he was suggested by his fellow people to not participate in Ikemefuna's killing, He still killed Ikemefuna so that he did not appear weak in front of other people. This effectively demonstrates that he was even willing to kill his loved ones because he wanted to appear strong in front of everyone.

Okonkwo dies at the end of the novel due to his masculine mentality. When he comes back to Umuofia after seven years of his exile period; he notices the changed lifestyle of his people. He observes how Christian missionaries have influenced people and Europeans have introduced a new culture and system among them. He could not accept the change in his culture. He thought that he along with the whole of Umuofia will fight against the Europeans. He killed one of the European messengers to show his strength and also to encourage his fellow people to wage a war against them. When he killed the messenger everyone went in a state of panic and questioned his act of killing. He then understood that his way of life was finished because his fellow clansmen had let the other messengers to flee. He took pride in being strong but his clansmen had fallen weak. They did not join him in fighting with the Europeans and also condemned his action of killing the messenger. He could not accept the truth that the people of Umuofia have fallen weak and are living under the rule and regulations of someone else. He could not live like a submissive person. So, he hanged himself from a tree to end his life because he could not live a life like the rest of his clansmen were living at present. Therefore, it can be concluded that Okonkwo lived in a masculine way in which he displayed his strength but when he was unable to display his strength he chose to die.

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