

THE IDEOLOGY OF MASCULINITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

Kshetrimayum Momo

Ph. D. Scholar

Department Of Humanities And Social Sciences
National Institute Of Technology Manipur, India

Sangeeta Laishram

Assistant professor

Department Of Humanities And Social Sciences
National Institute Of Technology Manipur, India.

Abstract

The present paper aims to analyze Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart, in line with conformity to the notions of masculinity in the broad gender arena. Okonkwo's character is largely shaped by the idea of success accrued to by the culture of his tribe. His attempt at achieving this success is further reinforced by his father's apparent failure as a man in his lifetime. Okonkwo is in other words the manifestation of the tribe's internalized idea of success and manliness. Okonkwo dissociates himself from all the qualities that characterized his father as agbala ; however, the irony remains that his inspiration, as he aspires towards his idea of success and greatness, seems to remain the same as his father he so much disdains. Whereas the ambitions of Okonkwo catapulted him to his much cherished success, at length, it also deprived him of emotions, happiness and at most times, reason. In short, Okonkwo's ideology of masculinity as prescribed by his culture, became his hamartia, which leads him and the ideology he represents to their final doom.

Key words: Gender, Culture, Manliness, Success and Hamartia

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The standards of masculinity and femininity vary from society to society. Hoffman and others, in their article in the *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* asserts that the standards set by societies in relation to masculinity and femininity 'may or may not be reflected in a woman's personal definition of her femininity or a man's personal definition of his masculinity' (Hoffman, Borders and Hattie 477). *Things Fall Apart* depicts a unique society where also conceptions of maleness or femaleness is prescribed and guided by standards. The present paper is an attempt at examining the portrayal of maleness in this novel by Chinua Achebe and how the characters in it are affected by the socially conditioned general perceptions of masculinity. However, these two disparate concepts may or may not be diametrically opposite to each other and attempts are made to explore the coexistence of these two concepts in a culturally tolerant / intolerant and self expressive situation. It is natural that both men and women express themselves in ways they believe the culture they are born into and molded them permits them to do. Masculinity ideologies in this novel go across the expression of energies of the male characters, 'male selfhood', which can be termed as 'norm approved' aspects of his subsistence.

The fictional society of Umuofia on which the story of the novel *Things Fall Apart* is based, can be any society in Igboland, in the present southeastern Nigeria. The distinctiveness of this society is reinforced by the strong cultural notion of 'otherness'. On one hand, the males are different from the females; and on the other, some males having distinct characteristics of male are different from other men. The clear definition of masculinity thus draws upon the perceived differences of the sexes and equally within the (male) sex. The societal approach seems to be in consonance with part of Hoffman and others' research findings that 'for both men and women, biological sex (maleness/femaleness) was a key component of their respective definitions of masculinity or femininity.'

The biological standard is apparently the bedrock of the determination of maleness between the sexes. Other researchers like Spence equally maintain that to a large extent, masculinity draws upon maleness. This in turn, may imply a homosexual (or intra-sexual) evaluation of key qualities that distinguishes one man from others thus making the same male distinctively 'male'

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or masculine. The question therefore would be if there are actually distinct human individualities and behaviors that are inherently masculine?

As Kimmel points out, maleness has meanings which vary from one society/culture to another, within any society/culture over time, within each individual over time, and, perhaps most important, among different individuals in one group at one point in time (i.e., within-group variability). (3)

Achebe's male characters in *Things Fall Apart*, as well as the general society of Umuofia define masculinity by specific traits of maleness, which appear to be communally approved by the society. Generally, the organic certainty of the presence of male phallus marks out the male. But beyond that, there are other outlined strong support symbols and qualities: A man must make use of the phallic symbol in procreation because his worth is to a considerable extent, informed by the size of his family. It is at this higher deliberation that maleness becomes unique as against manhood in the ordinary sense of 'being a man'. A man, endowed, like other men, with the phallus, but unable to use such in the task of procreation, risks not considered male at all. Okonkwo climbs up the social hierarchy and 'acquires' four wives, who in turn, have children for him. Thus, the degree or potency of masculinity is often assessed by this direct consequence of biology.

Closely associated with the biological expression of procreation or sexual virility is physical dexterity. In the Umuofian society, a man becomes noticeably masculine when he accomplishes, or at least is associated with, some remarkable physical feats. For Okonkwo, the need for either association or recognition with masculinity is uppermost. He thus does not let any opportunity slip off his hands. At the early part of the story, even when his lethargic father, Unoka, was still alive, he encouraged himself to build up a strong body that enabled him to successfully win a coveted wrestling laurel for his community. Wrestling is a sport for men alone in his society; however, it is not all men who wrestle. Only men with special masculine qualities, courage and stamina precisely, engage in wrestling and more so, men who have higher sharpness, like Okonkwo, succeed in being champions.

Beyond these personal levels of physical and biological expressions, scholars have also broached masculinity at a deeper 'personality characteristics' levels. This is more like looking at the larger cultural plan and psychological level of masculinity, in other words, considering those covert features which inform the physical manifestations of 'maleness.' This viewpoint, contributed by social psychologists, highlight 'prescriptive or norm based masculinity' and 'trait masculinity.'

In the first outline, prescriptive or norm based, man is considered masculine when it is believed that he behaves 'in ways thought to embody male role norms in his culture, whether he himself actually does or not'. (Hegelson 655) On the other hand, in trait masculinity, 'a man is considered masculine when he possesses the characteristics of culturally constructed

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expectations about behavior appropriate for men.’ (Levant et al 329) Here, there are bound to be varied opinions in consideration to Achebe’s characters in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo, for example, would be more submissive to prescriptive or norm-based masculinity, while he equally struggles, although, without good success to meet the culturally constructed expectations about behavior appropriate for men.

Starting from the latter, which is ‘trait masculinity,’ it is interesting to know that Okonkwo falls short of certain crucial expectations of the real man. The real man is anticipated to build his total self in a way that will train him to conform to culturally constructed expectations of male behavior in his society. Thus, Okonkwo, a typical man of the locale, Umuofia, of the story, *Things Fall Apart*, is expected to flow with the canons of the society without much struggle. Indeed, he should learn to stick on to the demands of the society in relation to both palpable and concealed taboos. Okonkwo succumbs to his rash character a couple of times in the story and goes opposite to the societal standards. On one occasion, he beats his wife during the week of peace and is subsequently sanctioned by the entire clan. Customarily, masculinity in his society demands that one matures beyond the physical strong man to the level of self-controlling strongman, both of his internal self and his outer world. He must be clever in handling others because creating a well balanced and acceptable relationship both at the domestic and societal levels is a precondition of ‘trait masculinity.’ This is not the case with his friend Obierika. Obierika is a more balanced character, who would at all time think deeply of actions before embarking on them. He is in charge of himself. He understands the culture of his people very well and keeps the same with reasonable success.

While attaining self-control remains imperative in the crystallization of masculinity, using such an achievement to approach strong social issues, like, keeping the subtle taboos is extremely beneficial. Once more, Okonkwo fails to do so. First, after distinguishing himself in obtaining the acquittal of a virgin and a young boy, as reparation for his clan whose citizen lost a dear wife to the thoughtlessness of a neighboring clan, he wins the custody of the young boy. The end of the young boy is almost certain, he has to die. Okonkwo is expressly warned by both his conscience and a wise elder not to be part of the ‘killing’ of the young boy. He however, should not oppose the voice of the oracle of the hills and the cave that pronounces death; but the performance should be by other people. The reason being that the boy calls him father, (an enviable symbol of masculinity in his society) and no man, fully realized and fully respectable, kills his child. But Okonkwo, either willfully or unconsciously ignores these and personally slays the young boy, Ikemefuna.

This is tangentially linked to the next point of debate of Okonkwo’s conformity or otherwise to ‘trait masculinity.’ After Ikemefuna’s death, Okonkwo’s son, Nwoye, loses love and respect for him. Perchance, the emerging relationship between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye calls to question the legitimacy of masculinity in relation to heredity and continuity. One of the most important determinants of masculine personality is reproduction, so it is equally implied that the duty of the man in this direction will remain partial if the child, who should, at his own time,

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take the baton of continuity forward is not well nurtured. Kimmelⁱ conceptualized his nurturing of his newborn son as an aspect of his masculinity or maleness. This appears opposing to the principal view, especially in Africa, which shifts child-rearing to the females. Nurturing is integral to rearing and stands the risk of being feminized if it is not claimed as part of trait masculinity. This may explain why it does not occur to Okonkwo, initially, to envisage nurturing Nwoye, his son, and even Ikemefuna, his foster child as part of an evaluation of how successful he is as a man. However, towards the end of the story, he feels a sense of disappointment and failure when Nwoye leaves the ways of the clan to embrace Christianity.

Physical expressions of contraries to the ‘culturally constructed expectations’ of the society in the analysis of Okonkwo’s character appear obvious. Some of such expressions, though physical, are actually beyond the physical, in fact, they are spiritual. Their consideration is informed still by the nature of the society under examination, where, according to Okoro, there is a ‘plenum of forces.’ (190) It invariably means that one cannot separate ‘being from forces or forces from being... spirit or force has primacy over matter which indicates the all pervading and all permeating nature of spirit’. (Okoro 190) The lives of almost all the characters in *Things Fall Apart* are directed by some unseen forces or in simple terms, spirits. The central spirit, which controls the totality of the being, is *Chi*. No matter what one does, as a human being, if his *Chi* does not give approval, it will be all in vain. It is therefore, for this reason that Okonkwo’s struggles are moderated by his *Chi*. This powerful supernatural acknowledgement equally contributes to the culturally constructed expectations of his masculinity.

So, in Okonkwo’s world and culture, masculinity is to a large extent shaped by the unseen forces around the man. Examples abound in his case for instance, he has worked so hard and made a tremendous progress in all fields of life and also gained wide recognition and acceptance in Umuofia, yet tragedy has continued to befall him. At the domestic level, he is unable to attain satisfaction in his son Nwoye. He conceives that as tragic because if Nwoye does not walk in line with cultural expectations, then his entire life will be a failure. More so, even the child that seems to be capable of holding forth for his idea of masculine greatness, Ezinma, is biologically female and does not in reality belong to him. At the larger social level, he offends the land and the people when he inadvertently shoots and kills a clansman. This singular act, conditioned by forces beyond human control sets him back to the beginning of life. The most tragic incident would be when he has, towards the end of the story, concluded to demonstrate his understanding of masculinity by contending with all external forces for the retention of clan purity. He has wished that the entire clan will think and decide along with him, but he also has prepared himself to go alone if others refuse to follow. As a result, therefore, he single-handedly, challenges and kills the Whiteman’s messenger. On discovering his lone action, he commits suicide. This final act appears to have ruined all he labored for in his entire life. Perhaps, he is destined to end up in dishonor, like his father. Yet, Okonkwo is not directly responsible for all these. Therefore, trait masculinity is somehow moderated by spiritual forces.

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In prescriptive or norm-based masculinity, the central idea is that ‘males act in the ways they do, not because of their male role identity, or their level of masculine traits, but because of the conception of masculinity they internalize from their culture’. (Pleck et al 14-15) In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo grows up in a society where he needs to prove that he is a man, and the definition of a man must come from the society, not from within him. He seeks to understand the features of a man, as the society has determined, after which he would step up towards actualizing those features. His early lessons of maleness, obviously gleaned from his father’s personality revealed characteristics that were unacceptable to him because they do not synchronize with societal standards. His father, whose name, Unoka, connoting that ‘home is supreme,’ indeed is a ‘home-man.’ He relishes staying at home while his contemporaries are out in the fields struggling to make a mark in the predominant occupation of the people, farming. Okonkwo is thus quick to learn that maleness is not determined at home, but out there in the wilderness of human encounters with his fellow beings and the elements of nature. He thus looks outward for a more appropriate and at least nominally acceptable standard. Therefore, early in life, Okonkwo embarks on an intensive scanning of human qualities for tremors of masculinity. He would avoid replicating his father’s character, because that does not measure up to the acceptable societal standards of masculinity.

Since norm based masculinity is external, Okonkwo’s quest for it would mean internalizing as many of its external qualities as he is able to, from time to time. Therefore, Okonkwo’s real personality undergoes a major overhaul to fit into societal approval. For him, the actions or growth towards masculinity are outward. Since, for the society that declared his father a failure, success in the masculine arena considers socially approved male qualities, as opposed to female qualities; concretely expressed in occupation or trade, family size, physical prowess, development of special skills and or talents, inculcation of boldness, bravery and courage, which are capable of distinguishing one in battles and combats; Okonkwo’s psyche internalizes all these qualities and he subsequently pursues them. Early enough, he subordinates himself to Ogbuefi Nwakibia, a highly successful man who ‘had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children.’ These, to him, are excellent norm masculine qualities He develops through sharecropping, an extremely slow way to establishment in farming. He grows from nothing; indeed, his father left nothing, but debts. Then from a common laborer and share cropper in the service of this elderly wealthy farmer of his clan, he works so hard that in a short while, he gains economic independence, and even out grows those who were several times wealthier than him. He is able also to restart and grow into prominence in Mbaino, his maternal home, after calamity strikes him in Umuofia and he is necessarily exiled for the maintenance of clan purity. It is on record that Okonkwo inadvertently kills a clan’s man during Ogbuefi Ezeudu’s funeral and must lose everything he has worked for and leave Umuofia as dictated by the oracle of the hill and the cave.

Then, Okonkwo struggles to dissociate himself from all that characterized his father (as agbala); however, the irony of the entire situation remains that his inspiration, as he aspires

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towards his idea of success and greatness seems to remain the same father he disdains. As a young man, when he moves with determination to challenge the indispensable Amlinze, the cat during a wrestling bout, he momentarily grows faint in courage but then must boost his boldness by requesting that his father plays a tune of encouragement from his flute. This is one seemingly positive aspect of his relationship with, or inspiration from his father. Thereafter, throughout his life, in the novel, he puts his father in focus, obviously working hard to avert his father's self inflicted tragedy: weakness and laziness that result in poverty. His father's fate haunts him so closely that he resents any semblance of weakness, or any act that will equate him with his father's laziness. But towards the end of the story, he seems to regret that he may not have a juicy tale to tell his father in the ancestral world, after death, because Nwoye, who naturally should uphold continuity in their line, has deflected to Christianity, as against ancestral worship. This, to him is a mark of failure in normative masculinity.

That brings the discussion to Okonkwo's family life. Part of the approved masculine qualities, at least at the basic level, is the urgency or necessity of a family by a man. No doubt, Okonkwo establishes himself as masculine because he is able to acquire four wives and bear several children. It is a credit to his brave masculinity that even the lady he desired to marry, when he was much younger and not wealthy enough to fulfill the requirements for a marriage, eventually walked into his bosom to become one of his wives. Although he does not meet up the standard of Ogbuefi Nwakibia, in amassing wives and children, he, however establishes his prominence in creating a sizable family.

Equally, beyond material maturity and excellence, Okonkwo strives towards emotional growth or bluntly speaking, suppression of the emotion. He learns, in time that a man must behave manly and not show unnecessary emotions. A man must be fearless and curb emotions in the face of threats. He is able to hold himself when his favorite daughter Ezinma is taken away into the coven of the oracle by the priestess, Chielo, in a bid to appease the gods, because Ezinma is Ogbanje. This act, to him, is a test of the nature of the 'man', or the content of courage and boldness in him. Truly, he is not expected to show any kind of emotion because they are exclusively feminine and only the weak man, akin to a woman or *agbala* can do so. It is for this already internalized idea, that he is determined to stand firm in defense of his 'perceived' integrity of masculinity. He further joins the select few of his clansmen to obey the oracle of the hill and the cave, who accordingly has instructed them to kill the young man Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's foster son. Deep within him, he would spare Ikemefuna, and even mentor him closely to become a respected member of the community. But in killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo suppresses his 'male role identity [...] masculine trait', what in other words would have made him stand out as a distinct man within the society. He rather works towards conforming to his notions of societal approval of the man. To him, these are qualities and actions that are capable of securing a place for him in the masculine circle. These are part of what it takes to be a real man for a clansman.

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Part of the reasons for this and other extreme actions of Okonkwo, in harmony with the cultural masculine ideology of his society, is explained again by the internalized notion of success. Success is a masculine identity. Failure is able to introduce 'exclusion' of the victim from the masculine circle. Okonkwo, therefore, must work hard to succeed in all endeavors of life to remain the man he admires. He is afraid of failure. Almost all observers believe this is one major emotion (fear) that fuels all other traits which result in his eventual tragedy.

Achebe's Okonkwo has been seen from different perspectives by different commentators, but in this paper, he has been analyzed in line with conformity or otherwise to the fledgling notions of masculinity in the broad gender arena.

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