

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chinua Achebe's '*Things Fall Apart*': Males and Masculinity, a commentary

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Introduction to the novelist

Born in the Igbo town of Ogidi in eastern Nigeria on the 16th of November 1930, Chinua Achebe was the fifth child of Isaiah Okafor Achebe and Janet Achebe. His father was an instructor in Christian catechism.

In 1953, at the age of twenty three Achebe took a degree in English from the prestigious University College, Ibadan, thereby becoming member of the select elite West African community.

He emerged as one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous people.

The white man had always depicted Africa as primitive and socially backward. *Things Fall Apart* was published as a response to this false understanding. It sought to convey a fuller understanding of African culture and gave voice to an underrepresented and exploited Colonial subject.

Aim of the Paper

The paper aims to study a few chosen male characters in the novel and analyze what actually constitutes the concept of "masculinity", how is the concept misunderstood and misrepresented.

The paper will be an attempt to study traditional opinions, together with unconventional opinions, with the aim of arriving at a well grounded and balanced perspective regarding 'masculinity'.

Keywords: Male, masculinity, rigidity adaptability, Okonkwo

***Things Fall Apart* Plot Overview**

Things Fall Apart, set in the 1890s, portrays the clash between Nigeria's white Colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, one of the first to receive global critical acclaim.

The novel follows the life of Okonkwo, an Igbo leader and local wrestling champion, in the fictional Nigerian village of Umuofia. As a successful man, Okonkwo lacked patience with unsuccessful men like his father, Unoka and his son Nwoye whom he found worthless and lacking in manly qualities.

The novel is split into three parts, with the first describing his family, personal history and the culture and customs of the Igbo community. The second and the third sections talk about the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community. Okonkwo refuses to adapt to the changing political and social scenario and commits suicide, the only solution he sees for himself.

The narrative tells us of the tragedy of Okonkwo's death which is seen as part of a greater tragedy: the defeat and forced transformation of a great people. Achebe's detailed descriptions of Igbo traditions, culture and beliefs, serve as a documentary for the reader who, by the time the novel ends, realizes that it is the story of a culture that has been irrevocably transformed. The novel is a sensitive and balanced portrayal of African tribal culture and serves to dismiss the contrary opinion of English white scholars who have called Africa, "the Dark Continent" for its ignorance and lack of culture.

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Male and Masculinity

Masculinity refers to the social expectations of being a man. The term refers to the roles, behavior and attributes that are considered appropriate for boys and men in a given society. Masculinity therefore is a constructed concept and may be defined socially, historically and politically rather than being biologically driven.

Traits traditionally viewed as masculine in Western society include strength, courage independence, leadership and assertiveness. Strangely, these are traits which Okonkwo has striven to achieve. The novel begins with praise for Okonkwo's strength and expertise in wrestling. His wealth indicates his independence, while his stature and status as one of the revered elders of Umuofia ,signify his leadership quality and his assertiveness.

Okonkwo's Journey towards Masculinity

With Unoka as a father, Okonkwo grew up to be a disgruntled and frustrated young man. As a young man Unokaw was fun loving, played the flute well and enjoyed music and the company of musicians. However Unoka, the grown up man was a failure.

"He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more ,and piling up his debts." (p.4)

When Unoka died, he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt.

Having someone like Unoka for a father was bad ,but growing up to be a replica of him would have been worse. Okonkwo hence, from a very early age ,had decided that he would NEVER be like his father.

Fortunately, among these people, a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father. Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things.

Young as he was ,he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the adjoining nine villages.

"He was a wealthy farmer, with two barns full of yam and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter- tribal wars."(p.6)

Age was respected among his people ,but achievement was revered.

This was the image that Okonkwo had created for himself .This was the 'masculine' image that Okonkwo was proud to possess and prouder to exhibit. It was everything that an Igbo male or for that matter any male ,would want to be identified by. And it was everything that Unoka WAS NOT.

Varying Interpretations of Masculinity

Okonkwo's revulsion of his father's personality shapes much of his violent demeanor. He had always viewed his father as a spendthrift, a lazy man, weak and therefore 'effeminate'. The people of the Igbo community would refer to such a person as 'agbala' ,meaning woman. And Okonkwo no woman.

Okonkwo associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display. He frequently beats his wives and threatens to kill them from time to time. He acts impulsively and rashly and feels his behavior is correct and most appropriate for a male who is the master of his household and a leader in his community .

There are other male characters in the novel who are by no means effeminate and behave with restraint and maturity. For them being a 'male' and displaying masculinity has another connotation altogether. We are told about Obierika, Okonkwo's friend and mentor. Obierika, unlike Okonkwo "was a man who thought about things." Obierika refuses to accompany the men on their trip to kill Ikemefuna. He advises Okonkwo not to have a hand in the kill and keep away from shameful act of executing his surrogate son. Okonkwo, however refuses to accept this suggestion. Not only does he volunteer to join the party, but violently strikes him with his matchet when the boy turns towards him crying "My father they have killed me!"(p. 44)

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This mean, violent and dastardly act is simply because he is afraid of appearing weak before the party and his community.

Okonkwo disapproves the uncanny behavior of his son Nwoye. He is inwardly pleased when Nwoye begins to develop 'well' in the company of Ikemefuna. There was a special satisfaction in him when he saw Nwoye doing "masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood or pounding food." (p.38) He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices. Okonkwo felt 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." (p.38)

Okonkwo's views on masculinity are not altogether wrong. What goes against him, is his rigidity. He feels that kindness and softer feelings are only for women and when seeking men - indicate a lack of masculinity.

Obierika and Okonkwo are the best of friends and remain so, despite the difference in their concept of masculinity. Okonkwo's seven year exile forces him to spend the period with his maternal uncle Uchendu.

Okonkwo finds faults in Uchendu for his preference for negotiation, compliance and avoidance of anger and bloodshed qualities which Okonkwo feels, makes a man effeminate.

Then there is Mr. Brown, a Christian missionary, whose main aim is to convert the residents of Umuofia. Mr. Brown does not allow his followers to antagonize the clan. He institutes a policy of compromise, understanding and non aggression. He even becomes friends with prominent clan leaders and builds a school and a hospital in Umuofia. Unlike Reverend Smith, his successor, he attempts to appeal respectfully to the tribe's value system rather than harshly impose his religion on it.

Mr. Brown, Uchendu and Obierika, in a way act as foils to the character of Okonkwo and appear as balanced individuals rather than men full of rage, anger and impetuosity. They are reasonable and thinking individuals. They do not advocate the use of force to counter opposition. Rather, they have open minds regarding foreign culture and changing values.

Conclusion

The novel is a study of complex issues and portrays complexity of the Igbo society. It is a study of Okonkwo's deterioration in character in an increasingly unsympathetic and incompatible environment, emphasizing the complex and dynamic qualities of society and its direct impact on man's behavior, development or downfall. It is the tragedy of a good and prosperous man because of his rigidity and refusal to change and adapt. Obierika's receptive and adaptable nature maybe more representative of the spirit of Umuofia, than Okonkwo's questioning rigidity.

One begins to see new perspectives of 'masculinity', as one reads into the characters of Okonkwo, Unoka, Obierika, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, Mr. Brown and Reverend Smith.

References:

Achebe, Chinua *Things Fall Apart*, Penguin Books, England, 1996.