

Forces in Conflict: Militarism, Masculinity and Colonial Domination in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: This article seeks to study the nuances of masculinity in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and tries to recognize how masculinity plays a crucial role in the power struggle between indigenous societal politics and the colonial rule. It seeks to inspect the playing out of 'hegemonic masculinity' prevalent among colonial authorities in their own land and how it infiltrates into the simple and uncomplicated lives of the Igbo people who find themselves squeezed between dissimilar sets of gender dynamics and moral values consequential of the creation of the phallogocentric project of colonialism. It is shown to deal with the complex network of power and display which goes into the making of notions of hegemonic masculinity that are at variance with indigenous standards and manifestations of masculinity. The research analyses the discourse of masculinity and cultural clash by gendering the two societies in focus – Western culture and African traditional culture to ascertain which is masculine and which is feminine. The novelist has tried to expose colonialism as a hegemonic power through an overt portrayal of the cultural struggle between the colonizer and the colonized in Nigeria. The contestations of militaristic power occur at two levels – the colonizers' controlling the colonized under the garb of development and civilization and on the other hand the skirmish between two factions of tribal natives to establish their hegemonic identity. This assertion of power and status and imposition of one's agency over another becomes the crux of hegemonic masculinity which often leads to being toxic. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is one such novel which shows power struggle at different levels of administration.

Keywords: Hegemony, Masculinity, Militaristic power, Colonialism, Cultural studies, Conflict

ResMilitaris, vol.12 n°,5 ISSN: 2265-6294 Spring (2022)

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Introduction: *Things Fall Apart* is written by the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe and published in 1958. The novel portrays the Igbo culture before and after colonization. The pretext of colonization as apparently established is the civilizing mission which is supposed to enlighten the indigenous people and modify their culture. The novel is based upon Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony which states that any regime does not necessarily rely on dominance by force but uses hegemony as a system of control. Gramsci posits that a hegemonic system is established through the willing consent of people which is attained by the ruling government through cultural hegemony. Achebe's novel, hence, shows the hegemonic model of consensus and coercion that can be found in the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. 'Hegemonic masculinity' can be seen as a significant element that disseminates new social norms which disturb the indigenous norms already extant. 'Doing masculinity' much in the similar way as Judith Butler claimed 'doing gender' leads to the successive crisis in the life of the protagonist and clan leader Okonkwo and leads to his debacle and utter disintegration of his society justifying the significance of the title *Things Fall Apart*. The presentation of the Igbo society is powerful and honest because it is intensely human — there are societal forces determining the individual, there are flaws in the hero it idolises, there is violence and inequality that is standardized and disregarded. One of the major constraints of the Igbo society is its imperfect idea of masculinity which outlines the life of Okonkwo who quite instinctively exerts to identify himself with the socially endorsed notion of 'heroism' and 'masculinity.' Okonkwo's life is dominated primarily by two things: "the fear of failure and of weakness," and his obsession to establish himself as one of the most powerful men of his clan. Moreover, most interestingly at the very outset of the novel we see power being determined by physical strength, one who can overpower his opponent player in wrestling is recognized to be

the leader of the clan. So, the yardstick of leadership rests on physical strength only and not on mental agility. What is posited against this idea of weakness is the idea of strength that constructs itself only with the negation of sensitivity: “To show affection was a sign of weakness — the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else — with a heavy hand.”

Textual Analysis: Okonkwo, perhaps “is not a cruel man,” but what drives most of his actions is not the presence of an unremorseful self but the eagerness with which he overwhelms each of these emotions — the passionate zeal to “tremble and subdue” puts down his fellowship and humanity. A man’s life so instituted by ruthless masculinity and a desire for success in his society, calls into question the authoritarian ideals of the whole society — because his manhood is the function of the latter. He is so obsessed in proving his masculinity that he starts hating his son because he turns out to be more like his effeminate father and not him. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a valiant warrior. He would stamp out the disturbing signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him. “I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands” (23-24). He wants his son to listen to the masculine stories of violence and bloodshed rather than sitting among women folk in the house and listen to kitchen stories. A deep understanding of Nwoye’s character shows that he still has those effeminate tendencies and is only trying to humour his father by acting tough: “And so he pretended that he no longer cared for women’s stories. And when he did this, he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him (38).” With the arrival of Europeans however, Nwoye takes a u-turn and does exactly which upset his father. He joins the new religion (Christianity) disregarding his father’s orders, not minding being disowned; this is an obvious culture clash between traditional and Western beliefs, and representative of masculine versus feminine beliefs. Nwoye decides to follow his own feminine heart for once and do only things, which pleases him: he decides to join the

church and this leads to the unleashing of Okonkwo's wrath on Nwoye. Okonkwo has always believed that being able to keep the household under control is a prime feature of manliness. He thinks, "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" (46). To escape from the shadow of his father, he engages in the murder of Ikemefuna. The boy lives in Okonkwo's household for three years, and becomes a part of his family. Then, one day, an oracle decrees that he be killed. The message is brought to Okonkwo by Ezeudu, who is a greatly respected man of old age and a former warrior. Ikemefuna is to be taken out of Umuofia and killed, but Ezeudu urges Okonkwo not to participate in the killing, arguing: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear hand in his death" (40). Ikemefuna is like a son to him and Okonkwo also feels in that way. Though the wise clan person suggests him not to join in killing, he did not obey. He feared that he will be judged as coward and so he used his own machete to cut him down though he feels depressed for that for a long time. "Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna" (55). His concept of masculinity forces to get engaged with such an act that he despised for long. Militaristic power is also a key aspect of the society Achebe represents. Among the Igbo, titles and status are closely linked to one's capacity to show his physical prowess and military skill. Okonkwo rises to prominence in the village because of his strength as a wrestler and warrior and not through other agencies or forces.

Possession of wealth is a major indicator in assessment of manliness in Igbo society. Not only wealth but also number of wives, children and barns contribute in construction of masculinity in the society. As a result, males are always driven by the motives to build their material profile as per the standards of the society. In meeting the expectations of his own clan members, Okonkwo commits such heinous crimes which he cannot get away with and which gradually led him to his devastation. The clan that he wanted to represent, the leadership power that he enjoyed slowly dwindled and this deterioration is mainly caused by the ardent desire to

show his masculine prowess. After achieving prestige in the clan, he becomes hyper-sensitive in his expression of emotional turmoil. He is coerced to maintain the ideal parameters set by masculinity in the society but the coercive force is created by Okonkwo more than his clan members so it is more of a self-imposed hyper-masculine tendency. Okonkwo is so much conditioned by masculinity that he categorizes food items in terms of gender categories. He believes that yam is the king of all crops as said by his ancestors. When his mother and sister worked hard in the fields to provide for the family, he is only obsessed with the type of yam they produced and not on the health of his female family members. This phallocentric ideal so clouds his mind that he considers coco-yams, beans, and cassava to be female type of crops. He beat his wives for simple reasons and thought that these are marks of male virility and one should proudly uphold that. Okonkwo's youngest wife, Ojiugo, forgets to make him his afternoon meal. When he learns that she has gone "to plait her hair at her friend's house . . . Okonkwo [bites] his lips as anger well[s] up within him" (21). Okonkwo's wives live in constant fear of his temper and are subjected to mental and physical abuse often. Okonkwo's reaction towards his daughter Ezinma too is ambivalent. Though he likes his daughter he would not accept that lest he is seen emotional. He, on the other hand, laments that she was not born as a boy because he thought only a boy is capable of inheriting his strength and carrying his legacy. Moreover, Okonkwo's wives are never named in the text, they are referred to as 'first wife' or 'second wife' thus denying their subjective position and autonomy and indicating their presence in association with their husband. This anonymity of the male characters underlines their marginalization in the family and the society.

Conclusion: While the novel sets on a positive note, showing a successful man who has risen from nothing and made his own fortune, the plot progresses to tell the story of his prosperity declining—in the words of the title of the novel, 'things fall apart' for Okonkwo, and the reason behind this is overt and over-masculinity. Finally, several of Okonkwo's masculine traits

contribute to his doom, and the third person to die by Okonkwo's hand in the novel is a Christian court messenger. While many of his clansmen are willing to accept the good things brought by the Christian missionaries, even if they do not succumb to the new religion, Okonkwo's pride, and strict adherence to the rules of his clan prevents him from admitting anything favourable about them. Provoked by a decree brought by a court messenger, he slays the man in a tussle, unable to come up with a verbal retort. When he realizes that his clan is not with him, he returns home and hangs himself in a tree behind his compound, completing the fourth death. Even though suicide is "an offence against the Earth" according to his beliefs, his pride drives him to kill himself, knowing his body will be considered "evil" (147), when the only other way is submitting to the people that he considers his enemies. Okonkwo's life is dominated by his fear of weakness and failure, leading him to embrace an extreme form of masculinity characterized by aggression, violence, and an unwillingness to show vulnerability. He believes that success and honour are defined by physical strength and control, which makes him rigid and unable to adopt to the changes brought about by the arrival of European colonizers. His suicide at the end is an act which can be seen as an abomination of culture, underscores the tragic consequences of his inability to reconcile his personal ideals of masculinity with the changing realities of his society. Okonkwo's downfall and the larger disintegration of Igbo culture under colonialism, demonstrates Achebe's critique of both the destructive nature of hyper-masculine ideals and the crushing power of colonialism that uses military force to dominate and dismantle indigenous cultures.

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