

Antithesis of Masculinity in the Works of Chinua Achebe: The Study of *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*

Landi Amos Gideon, Nkeiruka Esther Gordons and Fatima Sani Umar

Department of General Studies, Abubakar Tatari Ali Polytechnic Bauchi, Bauchi State, Nigeria.

Corresponding author: landiamos@yahoo.com

Abstract

The issue of masculinity has attracted the interest of the society in recent years. Masculinity is founded on certain assumptions about the role and responsibilities of a male member of a household or community. However, the validity of the assumption is recently questioned by changes in context and circumstances. The foundations on which masculinities have been built have regularly shifted over time and in different stages, although the overarching ideology of male power may not always have reflected these shifts or done so rapidly enough or comprehensively. This study examines the role of men in the society stressing out the positive and negative effects it has on the society. The study addresses the issue of masculinity, to see its effect on women especially in the Igbo society. With reference to *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, the study critically examines the masculine attributes of characters like Okonkwo and Obi respectively. This study argues that masculinity is used as a way of excusing violent men in the society. It also states that masculinity allows men to hide their emotions under the umbrella of being manly. The study concludes by drawing the attention of the society to the need for the study of womanism which gives room for the female gender to express themselves in the society.

Keywords: Antithesis, Masculinity, Feminism, Gender Equity, Gender Equality.

Introduction

The concept of masculinity has varied according to time and place, and is constantly subject to change. Masculinity is a set of qualities, characteristics or roles generally considered typical of, or appropriate to a man. It is the appearance traditionally associated with men. (Marianne Van den Wijngaard, 1997).

Academic study of masculinity underwent a massive expansion of interest in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This has led to the investigation of the intersection of masculinity with other axes of social discrimination and also to the use of concepts from other fields such as Feminism's Model of the social construct of gender. Some people argue that masculinity may be influenced by biological factors while others suggested that it is also culturally constructed. (Flood Michael, 2007).

Masculinity is something that is becoming increasingly challenged, especially in the last century, with the emergence of Women's rights and the development of the role of women in the society. In the recent years, many "Man Laws" and similar masculinist manifestos have been published as a way for men to re-affirm their masculinity. Through this, men have gained prominence in the society. (Hutchinson, Susan L).

What makes a man? The question has been asked many a time through the ages with varied response. "Man is what he reads," contend poet Joseph Brodsky. "The character of a man is known from his conversations," argues Menander, the Greek dramatist. While Mark Twain claims, "clothes make the man". To break it down to the basics, there are a few common traits that essentially make

up the masculine gender. Though roles vary slightly in each culture, there are certain vital characteristics that appear in almost every male. Whatever the positive or negative manifestations of these may be, they are truly what make a man what he is.

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarifications

Antithesis

Generally, Antithesis is used when two opposites are introduced in the same sentence, for contrasting effect. It is the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, usually in a balance way. It is a contrast between two things.

Masculinity

Masculinity is having qualities traditionally ascribed to men, as strength and boldness. It is the trait of behaving in ways considered typical for men (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/masculinity15/03/2015>, 04:08pm). Traits traditionally cited as masculine include courage, independence, and assertiveness, though traits associated with masculinity vary depending on location and context, and are influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors (Witt, edited by Charlotte, 2010).

Masculinity in African Society

Africa is a nation that is gender sensitive. Traditionally, society attaches much importance to gender issues, where men and women operate in separate practices even though they have the same culture. Roles are divided according to sex [that is male or female]. The interest in masculinity in Africa dates back a long time, connected to the onset of European imperial forays into Africa and the accompanying racist caricatures of the African [male]. (<http://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article284>).

Traditionally, in Africa, men are placed above the women. The man controls the home and dictates what should be done in the society. In government, economy and religion, men are always placed at the head and women are left at the bottom. Women are given less significant roles in the government. In Nigeria for example, the top positions like the president, the governors and most ministers are occupied by men. In a group of ten leaders, we find out that eight are men and then two women, even though women are beginning to be given prominence in the Nigerian policy, with the introduction of the 30% allocation for women in power or government. Societies have different ideologies and these ideologies vary between cultural and ethnical groups.

Writers in Africa tend to portray masculinity in their writings. They present heroes who are men and they assign masculine roles to them. In their writings, women are placed in the background while the men occupy significant roles. They do this with the intention to promote the masculine gender.

In East Africa for example, Ngugi Wa Thiongo' from Kenya captures masculinity in most of his writings just like in the text, *A Grain of Wheat*. This novel is about the events that led to the Kenyan independence or "Uhuru". It shows the struggle to regain the alienated Kenyan lands forcefully taken over by the British colonizers. The men took up arms to fight for their country while the women are left at home to take care of their children. In the novel, we see heroes like "Kihika" and "Wayaki" who were killed by the colonizers to scare the other "Mau-Mau" fighters, but this did not deter them instead, they were more determined to fight for their land. Masculinity was portrayed in this novel in

the roles the men played in the text. The men were the ones who fought and even lost their lives for their land. They were used as sacrificial lambs. The epigraph, "Thou fool, that which thou so west is not quickened, except it dies", stresses the importance of sacrifice for growth and regeneration. The men were used as heroes who sacrificed their lives for the progress of their mother land.

Concept of Masculinity in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the struggle for social equality between men and women remains an area of continuing relevance to any quest for a holistic understanding of economy, society, culture, and politics. Nigeria is a country that is divided within gender lines. Men are seen as "men" and women as "women". Roles are divided according to sex. Men are seen as the superior gender while the women are viewed as subordinates. In economy, politics and culture for example, the men occupy 90% of the activities of the society while the women are left with the 10%. The man dictates how things are supposed to be done first from his immediate family then to the society at large. Where a woman takes over the role of the man in the home, that woman is considered to possess masculine attributes and the man is then seen as a weakling as seen in J. P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt*.

In Nigerian politics for example, the men are seen in the forefront of the society. The men come out to aspire for positions while the women are used as mobilizers and not aspirants. In recent years, women have tried to aspire for positions in politics. These women can only represent at the local levels, the only female presidential aspirant to ever contest in Nigeria has not been given a chance because it is a man's office. Where a woman wins an election over the man, it becomes news. This is because it is considered as a rare thing. This has been the practice in Nigeria and has become part of the Nigerian culture. Masculinity is seen as a cultural construct. The Igbo culture for example presents men as superior, the best voice to be heard and the decision makers e.g. *Things Fall Apart* rights (Lauren 2009).

Effects of Masculinity

Biology determines whether someone is male or female, but socialization influences masculinity and femininity of a person. Early theories of violence attempted to reduce the cause of violence to a biological tendency of males: a "natural" reaction of males is aggression [Hearn, 1998.P17].

The two major types of masculinity are the patriarchal and hegemonic masculinities. These types of masculinities have great effect on the society. Hegemonic masculinity is the preponderant influence or authority over other domination. Patriarchal masculinity is set on the belief that men have the right to dominate and control women, children and some other men. It gives men the right to control and this control comes with the privilege to status, power and sex. These privileges make it impossible for men to tap into a more humane identity that allows them access to love. It denies men the natural outlets for emotional turmoil like loss, anger, pain, and envy. This is one of the reasons why the impulsive response to these types of emotions is physical violence. Some men hit when they get angry, hurt, confused and frustrated. Society has taught a man that lashing out is a perfectly acceptable response to emotions. In fact, a man who cries is seen as a coward and has lost his right to manhood. Any expression that is not violent is seen as unmanly. (<https://fatfempinup.wordpress.com/2012/05/05/the-effect-of-patriarchal-masculinity-on-men> 03/07/2014.9:20pm).

Masculinity steals the humanity from men and boys. It steals the right of men to cry, to grieve, to communicate their pain and frustration and to release their emotions in a way that will not alienate

or isolate them from the people that they love. A man who never cries and is always in charge of himself is seen as being masculine.

Masculinity is believed to be “natural” and “unchangeable”. George Tillner, author of *Men and Masculinities* responded, “power is the one aspect all variants of masculinity have in common, not necessarily as the real possession of power but rather as a “demand for dominance” or an “entitlement to power”. Masculinity is an identity. It is that which distinguishes a man from a woman. As such every man is expected to express this superiority over the women.

The patriarchal gender power is affecting the society and it leads to militarism. Even modern-day feminists recognize the need for an end to patriarchy, to stop the oppression of women. To stop the oppression of women, we must recognize that patriarchy does not benefit men, it also hurts them. Men are dying from patriarchal masculinity, from stress, murder and extended prison stays, from patriarchal guidelines that expect “toughness” so that men do not seek psychological or physical help with their health. It keeps them driving toward their goal of power, a goal that will never satisfy them, a goal that keeps them from the humanity of love. This is evident in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo was driven by this patriarchal masculinity until he loses his life. (<https://Fatfempinup.wordpress.com/2012/05/05/the-effect-of-patriarchal-masculinity-on-men> 03/07/2014,9:20pm).

Aspects of Masculinity in Things Fall Apart

Masculinity has been presented at several points in the text. From the early point in the novel, it is clear that Okonkwo’s idea of his own self-worth and his masculinity are strongly interrelated. As a child, his family did not enjoy the power and the status that he came to crave as an adult. His father was by Okonkwo’s description, lazy and lacking in ambition. Because of these characteristics, Okonkwo grow up in relative poverty, and many of the stronger, more ambitious men of the village pity him. As soon as Okonkwo could work, however, it becomes clear he was destined for great things. None of his father’s vices were prevalent; they were all replaced by a strong work ethic and a duty to both clan and family.

In *Things Fall Apart*, no character demonstrated the idea of masculinity better than Okonkwo. Okonkwo became an important and successful asset to his clan by achieving things in which his father refused to partake. He brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat, “in a fight which the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights”. Okonkwo’s father Unoka was a complete and utter failure in life in general. He was lazy and never respected. When Unoka died, he was heavily in debt and had earned no title. Okonkwo consciously adopted opposite ideals of his father and become a wealthy farmer with two barns full of yams, has three wives and many children, had taken two titles and has shown incredible skills in two inter-tribal wars. As the head of a large family, Okonkwo sees it as his personal duty to provide them with food and shelter and all of the good things in clan life. Okonkwo desires power and wealth in all of its forms.

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand such that his wives especially the youngest and his children lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper (TFA p. 9). Okonkwo never shows any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger (TFA p. 20). Through Okonkwo’s quick temper with his family he is never portrayed as admirable, he unquestionably has right to be aggressive at home. When Okonkwo brings Ikemefuna to his eldest wife, she asked “is he staying long with us?” Okonkwo thundered and stammered and says “when do you become one of the Ndichie of Umuofia?” (TFA,

p.10-11). Okonkwo treats his wife like a servant, demanding that she does whatever he commands her with no questions asked. Women, as demonstrated, by Okonkwo's eldest wife in the conversation, are taught to be silent and obedient. Okonkwo beats his second wife for merely cutting a few leaves off the banana tree to wrap some food. Okonkwo is plain old irrationally angry and takes it out on his wife, beating her even though he isn't truly angry about the banana tree. Okonkwo also beats his other wife very heavily, in his anger he forgets it was the week of peace but would not stop half-way through, not even for the fear of goddess. All these things Okonkwo did in his household were just in a bit to show that he is the man of the house and nobody dares to challenge him.

Nearly every aspect of the Igbo society is gendered, even crops. The growing of minor crops like coco-yams, beans and cassava are associated with women. Such crops are called women's crops while yam, the king of crops, a man crop (TFA p. 16). Yam, because it is the staple of the Igbo diet, is considered a man's crop. This allows men to maintain the position as the primary provider for their families and the respect which that role confers. Okonkwo gives us a very clear insight into how he views women: as objects to "conquer" and "subdue" when he characterizes his desire to wrestle as a desire for sex- "Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman" (TFA p. 30). Clearly Okonkwo doesn't see women as his equals. Also when a younger virgin and a lad of fifteen were brought from Mbaino, the virgin girl's fate is quickly sealed, she was considered a complete replacement for Ogbuefi, Udo's former wife while the young boy's fate remains undecided – "as for the boy he belong to the clan as a whole and there was no hurry to decide his fate" (TFA p.9). For someone else's crime the girl must give up the life she has known, her maidenhood and her hand in marriage to a complete stranger. Basically, women are passed around like object in the Igbo world.

Women are largely excluded from participating in the traditional "judicial" hearings as can be seen by their position in the audience – on the outskirts: "it was clear from the way the crowd stood and sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders" (TFA p.62). Only men can speak and judge at these trials, even when a woman is the one with a complaint to present. This is evident in the case between Mgbafor and her husband, Uzowulu. Been called a woman is clearly a nasty insult as it has the ability to "kill a man spirit" (TFA p. 19). That is why Okonkwo insulted a man who had contradicted him at a kindred meeting saying the meeting is for men. This is because the man has no title. Obviously, women aren't highly valued in Umuofia. Even crime is gendered. When Okonkwo inadvertently kills a clansman, his crime is referred to as a female crime. This is because it is an unintentional act. His punishment is to leave the clan and return after seven years. Male crimes are considered more severe and pre-meditated than female ones. Thus, the punishment for female crime is less severe than that of the male ones.

Okonkwo wants to pass on his values and respect for tradition on his children, both male and female. He wanted the males to be masculine while female should be feminine. In Okonkwo's eyes, his son has never been a particularly strong and promising boy. Okonkwo would rather kill his son than live with effeminate one: "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 hand" (TFA p. 24). Okonkwo is thinking of his own reputation as a man, which he doesn't want to tarnish by a soft son. The story of Okonkwo's life shows that there are several types of masculinity in pre-colonial Ibo society and that Okonkwo's is not the only possible one, but it is the kind that will become dominant after the basis for a more balanced one has been destroyed by colonialism (Griffiths 121).

Aspects of Masculinity in *No Longer at Ease*

In Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* Obi Okonkwo, a fictional grandson of the great fictional character, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* emerges as a distinct masculine character. The story of Obi is neither like that of Okonkwo nor Ezeulu. He is a relative modern man and most of his activities in the novel take place in an urban area, Lagos. In the real sense of masculine analysis, Obi is best considered as urban man, educated in far-away England and lives and works in Lagos. Obi's masculinity is not directly derived from the traditional yam and its genetic link with Nri, the progenitor of the Igbo people. Obi Okonkwo, according to the novel is sent to abroad to acquire western education for the benefit of his people. He is to study in England as a beneficiary of his people's scholarship. He wins the scholarship because he dominates the top position in the educational arena amongst his peers. He is depicted as extremely brilliant and hardworking at school thus controls that section and is accorded recognition by the society and that is why he is consequently given material encouragement to further consolidate his prime position at the top hierarchy of his section of the society. In the story, Obi is one of the few Africans in the middle class of the colonial society of Lagos. He is a senior staff in the ministry of education and precisely the secretary to the scholarship board. He is "a been to" and as such, has a unique experience, a firsthand experience of the white man's hand. He lives in the government reserved area and drives a car. All these are adornment that are in his generation and thus mark him out as a special person who belongs to the upper stratum of the global masculine hierarchy. At the beginning of the story, Obi's position in the masculine hierarchy is clearly established and at the same time, threatened. The story starts and ends in the court room. There are present in the court room: the man Obi; his boss, Mr. Green; the British Council man; the judge and Obi's kinsmen from Umuofia. Obi's hegemonic masculinity is on trial amidst his fellow specialist. (http://submission.scholasticahq.com/supportingfiles/184757/attachment_versions/184946/2015/03/16, 02:58am).

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe presents some instances of masculinity. In the society, male children are regarded as more important than female children. The inability of the woman to give birth to a male child causes serious unrest in the home. Before Obi was born, his mother had four daughters and was still anxious and his father was unhappy being that he has no male child. The society believes that a man is happy and complete when he has male children. Isaiah, Obi's father was tempted to marry a second wife but being a Christian convert, he could not marry a second wife. When Obi was finally born, he was called Obiajulu - "the mind at last is at rest". The birth of Obi brought joy to his family. This is because he turned out to be a male child.

In the text, only the male children were sponsored to study abroad. The Umuofia Progressive Union paid money to train the male children in England. The female children were not sponsored by this union. This was how Obi got his scholarship. When Elsie Mark visited Obi at home, she told him of how badly she needed the scholarship. She told him of how no relation of hers could afford to pay for her University. This is because her father had spent all his money on their brother, who went to read medicine but failed his exams. Their father did not pay for any female child instead he paid for the male child who eventually turned out to be a failure. He had spent twelve years in England only to return because of the death of their father and is now a community secondary school teacher. Parents sponsor their male children to school and the female children are left to find a means of going to school - they apply for scholarships (*No Longer At Ease* p. 83)

Women are expected to be respectful and obedient to their husbands. Obi's mother was a very devout woman. She does as her husband says even when it displeases her. Initially, she tells her

eldest daughter's folk -stories that her mother had told her – that was before Obi was born. She stopped telling her children stories because her husband forbids her to do so. Being a loyal wife, Hannah stopped telling her children folk- stories. She was loyal to her husband and her new faith – stories like that are not for the people of the church. (p. 52)

Obi considers the bride price of a wife being exorbitant. He scolded Joseph for paying a hundred and thirty Pounds' bride price and when Joseph tried to say he will someday pay more than that obi says "I'm not paying five hundred pounds for a wife. I shall not even pay one hundred, not even fifty". (p 38) Obi's refusal to pay any money for bride price shows that he does not believe that a woman is worth any money. Obi's ego did not allow him to accept the money offered him by Clara even when he truly needs the money. He prefers to suffer with his problems than to accept money from Clara. He finds a means of returning money to Clara, theoretically, obi is quite aware that Clara can make the same kind of demands on him that he makes on her, but this does not cause him to treat her as equal. On the contrary, maintaining a stance of male superiority is seen as the "African way" of doing things (NLA 100). Obi does not share his feelings and his deliberations with Clara, but rather confronts her with the results of his decisions. He is unable to accept help from her when he is in need, and he fails to accept responsibility when he learns that she is pregnant. That is why Clara finally breaks off the engagement

A man was not allowed to shed tears in any form. This will amount to being unmanly. In the court room, when the judge made the statement that "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this", tears came into Obi's eyes. But obi brought out a white handkerchief and rubbed his face in a way that people do when they wipe sweat. He even tried to smile so as to belly the tears. Also, when Obi's mother died, and the news was told him, Obi let tears run down his face like a child in the privacy of his bedroom. Obi could not control his emotions because of the relationship he had with his mother. Being a man and he was not expected to tear, he cried in hiding.

To show how the society operates around the man, when Christopher suggested to Obi and Clara about going to a dance, Bisi said she wanted to watch film. Christopher's response was "Look here, Bisi, we are not interested in what you want to do. It's for Obi and me to decide. This na Africa, you know" (P. 100). Christopher's statement shows that in the text, a woman does not have the right to make any decision for a man. It is in the place of the man to decide for the woman. The woman's role is to be obedient.

Summary and Conclusion

To speak of masculinity is to speak about gender relations. Masculinity is concerned with the position of men in a gender order. It is believed that masculinity is set in concrete, fixed by the genes or by God and impossible for women to influence (Raewyn Connell). The overall gender order of the world we live in is made up of organization and institutions each of which has its gender regime-and all but a few of them are male dominant (Cynthia Cockburn, 2010).

In summary, this study has attempted to give an overview of masculinity in African society. It went further to explain masculinity as an aspect of the African society where men are presented as superior to the women. This study also presents the negative effect that masculinity has had on the Igbo society-it has rendered the women as second class citizens-it has made the women voiceless-it has been used as excuse by men to maltreat and abuse the female gender. Using *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*, this study went further to give vivid examples and illustrations of how the male gender dominates the female gender in the Igbo society. This study also reveals the definition of

what it means to be a man in Nigerian society; he should be masculine and should protect his family and friends, in that he is willing to fight, earn his good reputation, and preserve and expand the honour of his family.

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