

Masculinities in Achebe's TFA

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Established heroic traits are essential background ingredients for the construction of masculinities in the setting of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. They constitute a kind of ideal, against which whoever may eventually command ethnic or clan respect, must aspire to. This view seems to agree with Kevin Alexander Boon's (2005) notion in connection with the relationship between heroism and masculinity. He rightly says:

... heroic qualities serve as models for privileged masculine behavior. In the first sense, the hero figure is an unattainable object of desire that occupies the transcendent realm of the divine; in the second sense, the hero figure engenders masculine affiliation through its presumed presence in the masculine other--that is, the man who is labeled "hero" is always other. No hero may label himself a hero without risking his heroic status.

On the basis of the above understanding, the man of "masculine behavior" is more or less, one who taps into the heroic behavior, and drawing upon it, shapes his own character. He essentially distinguishes himself from "other males," then far above the other sex. However, all are within human abilities. There is no need for the masculine character to transcend humanity, into the realm of the divine. He is like any other man in the society; makes the mistakes others make; could become a victim of societal prejudices; obeys and keeps the taboos of the society like other people; but must be distinguished in all acts.

The society on which the story of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is based, the fictional Umuofia, can be any society in Igboland, in the present southeastern Nigeria. Its uniqueness is reinforced by the strong cultural notion of "otherness." In other words, the males are different from the females, on one hand; and on the other, some males who have distinct male characteristics (masculine) are different from other men. The obvious considerations of the term, masculinity thus draw upon the perceived differences between the male and female sexes, and equally within the (male) sex. In other words, at the ordinary level, the masculine character is likely to be a man, different from the woman. However, this is not enough, because, the man in question should be distinct in order to be properly masculine. From the first consideration, the societal approach seems to be in consonant with part of the findings of an important field research undertaken by Hoffman et al. (2000:5). although the target is not africa, but the result of that research, part of which is "for both men and women, biological sex (maleness/femaleness) was a key component of their respective definitions of masculinity or femininity." equally applies to Achebe's Umuofia setting of *Things Fall Apart*.

In the novel, the biological criterion is a major determinant of masculinity. Masculinity is strongly tied to maleness, though there are indications of female will, attitude and attributes, which bother on masculinity. For researchers like Spence (1999) and Hoffman et al. (2000), masculinities, to a large extent, draw upon maleness. This may connote a homosexual (or intra-sexual) assessment of key qualities that distinguish one man from others thus making the same male distinctively "male" or masculine, while other males may become less masculine. Then the question for today's research would be if there are actually very distinct human traits and behaviors that are inherently masculine?

Maleness, as Kimmel (2000a) points out, 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)" In the lives of Achebe's male characters in *Things Fall Apart*, as well as the general conceptions of the society of Umuofia, the notion of masculinities, is defined by specific traits of maleness, which appear to be collectively approved by the society. These also emerge in various forms. At the general level, the biological 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 proper use of the phallic symbol in procreation because his worth is to a considerable extent, informed by the size of his family, not the presence or size of his phallus.

It is at this higher consideration that maleness becomes special as against manhood in the ordinary sense of “being a man.” For a man, endowed, like other men, with the phallus, but unable to appropriately use such in the actual task of procreation, the degree of his masculinity is either extremely low or he is not considered male at all. Okonkwo grows up the ladder in the society and “acquires” three wives, who in turn, have children for him. In assessing either the degree or strength of masculinity, this direct consequence of the biological consideration is very important. Closely associated with the biological expression of procreation or sexual virility is physical prowess. In Umuofia society, a man becomes recognizably masculine when he accomplishes, or at least is associated with, some remarkable physical feats. For Okonkwo, the need for either association or recognition with masculinities is uppermost. He thus does not let any opportunity slip off his hands. At the early part of the story, even when his indolent 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 that wrestle. Only men, who have special masculine qualities, courage and stamina precisely, engage in wrestling and more so, men who have higher acumen, like Okonkwo, succeed in being champions.

Beyond the rather personal levels of physical and biological expressions, scholars have also broached masculinities at deeper “personality characteristics” levels. This is more like looking at the larger cultural schema and psychological level of masculinities, in other words, considering those latent features which inform the physical manifestations of “maleness.” This viewpoint, contributed by social psychologists like Bem, (1974); Helgeson, (1994), Levant et al., (1992); Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, (1992) highlight “prescriptive (norm based) masculinity;” and “trait masculinity.” In the first outline, prescriptive or norm based, man is considered masculine when it is either believed or established that he behaves “in ways thought to embody male role norms in his culture, whether he himself actually does or not.” (Doss Brian D. J. Hopkins, Roy. (1998); Helgeson, 1994). On the other hand, in trait masculinity, “a man is considered masculine when he possesses the characteristics of culturally constructed expectations about behavior appropriate for men.” (Levant et al., 1992; Thompson, Pleck, & Ferrera, 1992). Here, there are bound to be varied opinions and responses in consideration of Achebe’s characters in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo, for instance, would be more compliant to prescriptive or norm-based masculinity, while he equally struggles, albeit, without good success to meet the “culturally constructed expectations about behavior appropriate for men.”

These two “masculinities” fascinate Humanistic scholars because they help to characterize many male personae in the society. Starting from the later, 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 expected to build his total self in a way that will prepare him to conform to culturally constructed expectations of male behaviour 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 adhere to the demands of the society in relation to both obvious and latent taboos. Okonkwo succumbs to his rash character a couple of times in the story and goes contrary to the societal standards. On one occasion, he beats his wife during the week of peace and is subsequently sanctioned by the entire clan. Invariably, 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 subtle in handling others because creating well balanced and acceptable relationships both at the domestic and societal levels is a prerequisite of “trait masculinity.” This is not the case for his friend Obierika. Obierika is a more balanced character, who would at all times 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 important in the crystallization of masculinity, using such an attainment to broach strong social issues, like keeping the subtle taboos is extremely beneficial. Once more, Okonkwo fails to do so. First, after distinguishing himself in obtaining a reprieve of a virgin and a young boy, as compensation for his clan whose citizen lost a dear wife to the recklessness of a neighboring clan, he wins the custody of the young boy. The end of the young boy is almost certain, he would 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 should; however, not oppose the voice of the oracle of the hills and the cave that pronounces death, but the performance or the act of killing should be by other people. The reason is 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 inadvertently ignores these and personally slays the young boy, Ikemefuna. This is tangentially linked to the next point of contention of Okonkwo's conformity or otherwise to "trait masculinity." After the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, loses love and respect for him. Perhaps, the emerging relationship between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye calls to question the authenticity of masculinity in relation to lineage and continuity. One of the most significant determinants of masculine personality is procreation, so it is equally implied that the duty of the man in this direction will remain incomplete if the child, who should, at his own time, take the baton of continuity forward is not well nurtured. Kimmel (2000b) conceptualized his nurturing of his newborn son as an aspect of his masculinity or maleness. This appears contrary to the predominant 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 conceive nurturing Nwoye, his son, and even Ikemefuna, his foster child as part of an assessment of how successful he is as a man. However, towards the end of the story, he feels a sense of failure and inadequacy 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 (2001:190) there is a "plenum of forces." 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" 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. Their belief pattern here is similar to the Hebrew/Christian belief, which expressly states that "if God does not build a house, in vain the builder toil...if God does not keep watch over the city, in vain the watchmen toil..." (Psalms 127:1-2). 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.

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., 1993; 14-15). In Achebe's *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, in other words, seeks to understand the features of a man, as the society has determined, after which he would step up or head 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 field (farm) 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 will look 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 or prescriptive 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. Obviously, therefore, Okonkwo's real personality will undergo a major overhaul to fit into societal approval. For him; therefore, the actions or growth towards masculinity are outward. This trend is typical of the concern of masculine studies for a reasonable period of time. Earlier analysis, in consonance with the above leaning largely saw masculinity in this outward sense. The ideology had little to do with the inner selfhood or the internal being of the man. No doubt, the psyche of the man was seen to have played a usual role of organizing the entire being, nevertheless, much of what was acknowledged as constituting a man (real man) consisted of how he has been able to project his being to conform to socially sanctioned traits and roles attached to manhood. Michael Roper (2007: 251) recalls how the discussions started. He writes:

"The bias toward the external in work on masculinity has been a characteristic from early on. When John Tosh and I wrote the introduction to *Manful Assertions* (1991) a decade and a half ago, we envisaged masculinity as an over-arching term, which included both cultural and psychological dimensions. We argued that masculinity was "the product both of lived experiences and fantasy," and that further studies were needed to "explore how cultural representations become part of subjective identity" (pp. 14-15). We indicated the need for approaches that explored points of connection between the social and the psychic.

Michael Roper's statement on the subjectivity of masculine ideology views identity of the man seriously. To him, there appears to be a tussle between reality (lived experiences) and fantasy (expectations and targets) because reality represents what originally constitutes the man, while fantasy includes the hitherto external issues that the man eventually internalizes. In the case of Okonkwo, this tussle is quite strong. At one point, Okonkwo's life runs smoothly along the path to greatness which he very much desires. For instance, in the very year he starts apprentice farming or the sharecropping experience with Ogbuefi Nwakibia, forces of nature come against him and his efforts (this is yet another expression of his chi [fate]), yet he is able to persevere and overcome. This "lived experience" reinforces the idea of maleness, both internally and externally. This lived experience and others of its kind can be placed side by side with his "fantasies." He fantasizes about his succession. He wishes either Ezimma or Ikemefuna could actually succeed him, that is hold up his lineage, so that he would have a guaranteed next generation that would worship and consult him as an ancestor. The interplay between the lived experiences and fantasies truly introduce a reasonable measure of subjectivity to the crystallization of masculine ideologies.

Roper's thesis no doubt came on before the decentering of masculinity ideology. The decentering process, according to Brian D. D and Hopkins J. R. (1998) and, Linzi Murrie (1998), has taken up the analysis of maleness from its initial entry into academic studies, at the normative level as apparently secured, through a shift from its claim to universality; and its subsequent entry into the domain of gender studies as a dimension opposite to femininity (Constantinople, 1973); then to its concern with a personality characteristically separate from, yet related to femininity (Bem, 1974). Analyzing Okonkwo's masculinity, in this light, suggests identifying why he constantly shifts from all traits he perceives as feminine.

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." (TFA.13).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 towards his idea of success and greatness seems to remain the same father he disdains. As a Youngman, 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, through out 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.

Achebe's male characters are unique personages in present day studies dominated with gender arguments like the social construct of identifying male and female differentiation. Thus, social tags and inclinations have become very relevant pointers to the concretization of the concept of masculinity. Spence (1985, 1999) and Hoffman et al. (2000, 2005), conclude that maleness describes masculinity and femaleness describes femininity; again, this does not mean that there are human qualities that are inherently female or male; maleness/masculinity may mean different things to different men just as women's conceptualizations of their femaleness/femininity will vary.

This relates to the idea of social tag. Within a society, some qualities are tagged on to maleness, and some uniquely to the opposite sex. While Spence argues that qualities may not be strictly peculiar to men, Fischer and Good (1998), as quoted in Hoffman et al. (2000; 2005), on the other hand supports

“a relationship between men's traditional, stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and undesirable behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics, including high-risk sexual behavior, psychologically coercive behavior, decreased recognition and expression of emotions, ... and psychological distress...”

Okonkwo's character development inclines towards the later. In order to express societal approved masculine ideology, Okonkwo consciously taps into the qualities highlighted by Fischer and Good as “undesirable behaviours.” Right from the beginning of his story, he dissociates himself from his father Unoka and later his first son Nwoye. It is also for the same reason that he develops a strong attachment to Ezinma and Ikemefuna. Even though both Unoka and Nwoye are males, both of them lack the maleness principles that translate to normative masculinity, which Okonkwo discerns in Ikemefuna; and on the other hand, though Ezinma is female, she seems to possess the traits that conform to masculinity ideology. In a similar vein, it is thus not altogether strange to hear Okonkwo, lose his patience on one occasion for the inability of men to express maleness in respect to Osugo, during a clan's meeting. “This meeting is for men...” (TFA.19), he utters because Osugo has not been able to distinguish himself by taking a title. This argument subtly summarizes Okonkwo's apparent conformity to Fischer and Good's position that masculinity ideology runs the risk of supporting, or approving undesirable behaviours.

In their field research into the authentic content of masculinity and masculine behaviour, Hoffman et al (2005) discover that “35% of the men interviewed described their masculinity as having “a forceful/aggressive component”. True to the African reaction, Okonkwo probably would have been part of the 35% of the researcher's respondents.

As a human being, he is an embodiment of aggression, force and raw power or strength. The aggression, with which Okonkwo pursues development of his total being; physical, emotional and material, is very bare. He works himself up, through a combination of raw strength, tactics and intuition to the level of leadership in war and cultural diplomacy. The story reveals that he becomes so distinguished in internecine combats that he joins the exclusive group of the power brokers who are **privileged** to drink with human skull. Of course, the qualification for this is only the ability to get human head or heads during hostilities with adversaries. He equally becomes part of the inner circle of responsible achievers, whose voice and opinion the clan must not only seek, but also respect in matters of communal interest. He is constantly invited to both general and executive community meetings and deliberations (that would be when he is not one of the conveners).

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; in other words, must 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,” like his father Unoka 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 Youngman 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.

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 analysed in line with conformity or otherwise to the fledgling notions of masculinity in the broad gender arena.

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