



FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND BUSINESS STUDIES
Department of Humanities

The Great Okonkwo's Demise

A Feminist and Postcolonial Literary Analysis of the Concept of
Emasculation in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

As the title suggests, this essay is a feminist and postcolonial literary analysis of the main character Okonkwo's downfall and demise in acclaimed author Chinua Achebe's 1958 novel, *Things Fall Apart*. A recurrent theme within the narrative is the concept of gender differences and gender roles, in the strict traditional and patriarchal system which serves as the setting of the narrative. Okonkwo, who is a traditional and proud Igbo man, has an aversion toward what is considered to be weak and feminine. Okonkwo is therefore struck with depression when he finds himself in a weak and helpless position, as well as emasculated emotional state of mind. Furthermore, Okonkwo becomes a victim to colonialism in the latter part of the narrative, which consequently adds to his already helpless and emasculated state of mind. The purpose with this essay is therefore to investigate if feelings of emasculation are the cause for Okonkwo's final decision to end his own life. Based upon the analysis included in this essay, one of the conclusions that could be drawn was that the helplessness and feelings of emasculation Okonkwo experiences within the narrative are too much for him to cope with and therefore cause his downfall and demise.

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1. Introduction

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe (commonly known as Chinua Achebe) was born in Igboland, southeastern Nigeria, in 1930. Achebe's parents were in contrast to his other relatives and neighbors, who practiced traditional Igbo customs and religious beliefs, Christian converts. Consequently, Achebe was provided with an alternative religious and cultural perspective from a young age. Achebe, who was a gifted student, was simultaneously raised in a community rich in traditional oral Igbo story-telling traditions, and in this environment, Achebe's mother and elder sister served as educators. Therefore, Achebe acquired an important traditional Igbo education in addition to the Christian teachings his parents provided him with, and the traditional western education he later acquired at the University College of Ibadan (Franklin).

Achebe's opinion on the manner in which African natives and their domestic culture were depicted in classic European literature is well documented. During his studies at the British Colonial University College of Ibadan, Achebe was offended by the way in which African literary characters and Africa itself were portrayed by prominent European 20th century authors such as Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad. Later in life, in 1975, Achebe would hold an influential lecture, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", about Conrad and his negative depiction of Africa and Africans in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). In his lecture, which later would become an essay, Achebe pointed out the elements of good versus evil that Conrad supposedly applied when deliberately describing Africa as an uncivilized contrast to Europe. Achebe's lecture and essay would eventually become an important contribution to the postcolonial literary discourse (Phillips).

As a response to the often racist and simplified depiction of Africa in western literature, in 1958 Achebe published his critically acclaimed novel *Things Fall*

Apart. According to Kalu Ogbaa, Achebe's novel was "the result of its author's urgent and dynamic response to a negative situation", in which Achebe presented a far more intricate and profound representation of African culture, including complex and interesting literary characters (Ogbaa 158). Through his novel, Achebe provided African readers with a narrative they could relate to, and be proud of, as well as a message to readers from other parts of the world that European colonizers did not cultivate Africa, and that Africa in contrast to European colonial beliefs was rich in domestic culture long before colonization (Ogbaa 16-17). Additionally, by producing African literature in English, in consort with other African novelists and writers, Achebe established and laid the foundation for the literary phenomenon known as "African literature today", referring to the notion that these postcolonial writers taught Africans to better understand and appreciate traditional English literature, including its traditional literary elements and structure (Ogbaa 158).

As previously mentioned, Achebe presents a rather complex and intriguing narrative in *Things Fall Apart*, which is arguably rich in themes and character development. One possible theme and aspect that is hard to disregard for a contemporary reader is the gender perspective. Within the narrative, Igbo men in general, and main character Okonkwo in particular, is according to traditions highly focused on achieving titles and subsequently status during their lifetime. Consequently, men who do not achieve any titles within the clan are viewed as "Agbala" (women), something which according to the highly patriarchal, pre-colonial Igbo culture is associated with a lower social status. According to Ogbaa, Igbo women did not necessarily feel dominated, though, because "women may have [been] portrayed as less visible than men in Umuofia, but their roles were as important as those of men" (Ogbaa 165).

Furthermore, the intention with this essay is to analyze certain aspects of the complex progression and character development Achebe presents concerning one of his characters in *Things Fall Apart*. More precisely, this essay is an attempt to test the thesis that feelings of emasculation cause main character Okonkwo's downfall and demise. The theoretical framework utilized in this attempt and essay, presented in detail in the method section, is a combination of feminist and postcolonial literary theory.

1.1 Plot Summary

Okonkwo is initially a man of high status in Umuofia, a consortium of nine villages of Igbo people living in the southern parts of Nigeria. Okonkwo's high status within Umuofia society originates in his bravery and abilities as a warrior and a wrestler, as well as in his abilities as a farmer with strong ideals and principles. The aforementioned personal traits were, according to pre-colonial Igbo values and customs, regarded as honorable and exclusively manly traits (Ogba 165). Okonkwo's forcefulness, principles and bravery are clearly related to the complex relationship Okonkwo had with his father, Unoka, who according to the same values and customs was considered feminine, a coward and a wasteful person. As a consequence of the shame Okonkwo experienced because of his father's unmanly traits, he decides to live his life in an opposite manner, being heroic and honorable, gradually building a successful farm, providing for himself as well as for his several wives and children. Furthermore, the argument could be made that Okonkwo ignores this traumatic and unresolved conflict with his deceased father, utilizing what a psychoanalyst would label repression, and that Okonkwo's life is in fact much affected by his attempt to forget and restore a shameful past (Barry 97-98).

As the narrative progresses, Okonkwo's status within the community is questioned by his peers for several reasons, which gradually leads him to an emotionally unstable and aggressive psychological state, and in the end forces him into

exile and refuge among his maternal relatives. During Okonkwo's time in exile, Umuofia is gradually colonized by Christian British settlers, which increases his already complex emotional state. Okonkwo finally returns to Umuofia, and finds his village in a different state than when he left, seven years before. Okonkwo immediately finds himself imprisoned and humiliated by the British colonizers and when he does not get the support he hopes for in order to wage a war and an uprising against their oppressors, he chooses to end his life. His choice, which arguably would be considered unthinkable to a preserver of traditional Igbo values such as Okonkwo in the initial part of the narrative, as well as a shameful act and crime against contemporary Igbo traditions, in many senses summarizes the physical and psychological suffering this oppression meant for the colonized people.

2. Theoretical Background

In this section the feminist and postcolonial literary criticism theory, which constitutes the theoretic framework for this essay, is presented. Furthermore, this section will explain how and why those theories are applied on a number of events involving the concept of emasculation concerning Okonkwo's character development in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

2.1 Feminist Literary Theory

According to Lois Tyson, feminist literary criticism "examines the ways in which literature (and other cultural productions) reinforces or undermines the economic, political, social, and psychological oppression of women" (79). Tyson points out that in likeness with other literary criticism theories, feminist literary criticism contains a broad variety of opinions and disciplines and that feminist literary criticism therefore provides a broad variety of options regarding the targeted phenomenon or subject of a literary

study (79). One perspective within the aforementioned theory is the phenomenon and concept of traditional gender roles within a patriarchy, which Tyson defines as “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles”, consequently promoting men as “rational, strong, protective and decisive”, while simultaneously promoting women as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (81).

In such patriarchal systems, as defined by Tyson, women are to a great extent excluded from privileged and decision-making domestic, academic, corporate and political positions, in an attempt by men to maintain political, economic and social power. Therefore, these patriarchal systems should be considered sexist in the sense that they promote the idea of women being congenitally inferior to men (81-82). However, in such patriarchal systems, men are likewise expected to live up to predetermined traditional gender role standards that are not always preferred by the individual or uncomplicated for men to live up to. Moreover, Tyson states the following:

Because traditional gender roles dictate that that men are supposed to be strong (physically powerful and emotionally stoic), they are not supposed to cry because crying is considered a sign of weakness, a sign that one has been overpowered by one’s emotions. For similar reasons it is considered unmanly for men to show fear or pain or to express their sympathy for other men.

(Tyson 83)

Additionally, Lois Tyson contends that men within the patriarchal system “are not permitted to fail at anything they try because failure in any domain implies failure in one’s manhood” (83). Those who historically have dared to question the traditional gender roles, for example the notion of men being superior to women because of their

physique, often have been ridiculed and questioned by patriarchal men as well as women, who share patriarchal ideas (82).

Another perspective on the gender role of men, which is of importance when attempting to analyze Okonkwo and his fate in the latter part of *Things Fall Apart*, is the concept of emasculation, described by Josephine Donovan as “the destruction of male energy and vitality” within a feminist literary criticism framework (Donovan 42). Considering Tyson’s definition of a patriarchy and the requirements forced upon men in such a system, it is obvious that men who are not able to live up to those requirements are viewed as failures in such a context. Failure in this context denotes emasculation: failure in one’s manhood and a progression in character towards the feminine, which is viewed as weaker or lesser in a patriarchal system and society. Moreover, for those men who manhood is of highest importance this would become an exceedingly serious matter and cause of stress and concern.

2.2 Postcolonial Literary Theory

The concept of emasculation is acknowledged within the field of postcolonial theory as well. According to John McLeod, author of *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010), the psychological effects of colonization, through incorporation of new and undesired sets of values, could imply extensive psychological trauma for the colonized part. For example, being subjected to racist values and consequently a negative view of the own people, culture and “self” could lead to a presentiment of inferiority and objectification for the individual, in contrast to a sense of equality and to the notion of being a human subject. Furthermore, McLeod states that the “imaginative distinction that differentiates between ‘man’ (self) with ‘black man’ (other) is an important, devastating part of the armory of colonial domination”, referring to identity formation, dehumanization, and feelings of objectification and emasculating (22-23).

The phenomenon of dehumanization and emasculation is described by McLeod through French-African psychiatrist and author, Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), who was initially subjected to racist slurs and dehumanization when moving from the colonized country of Martinique to the colonist country of France after the second World War (McLeod 23-24). In his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon accounts for the negative psychological aspects of colonization, and how the racist slurs he was subjected to by white people in power during this period contributed to a negative revision of his psyche. More precisely, Fanon experienced a negative identity formation in which white men were considered civilized, rational and intelligent, whereas he and other black men on the contrary were considered to be the “other”. In this context, Fanon states that “a man was expected to behave like a man. I was expected to behave like a black man”, referring to the feelings of inferiority, isolation and emasculation he experienced during his initial stay in the country by which his own country had been colonized (Fanon 112-114).

2.3 Using Feminist and Postcolonial Literary Theory

The Igbo culture and setting in *Things Fall Apart* are to a great extent characterized by a traditional patriarchal culture and system, in which Igbo women are supposed to attend to domestic chores and submissively obey their husbands, lacking any possibilities regarding for example domestic or political decision-making. Within the same context, Igbo men on the contrary are supposed to be defiant, courageous and able to make all important domestic, as well as political decisions, in consort with other privileged men. Within the narrative, Okonkwo goes to extremes in his pursuit to live up to what is considered to be ideals and manly traits in the patriarchal Igbo culture. For example, he does not hesitate to abuse his wives and children physically when they do not comply

with his demands and he takes great pride in his successful farm and distinguished position in society.

Furthermore, Okonkwo fears weakness, which he considers to be an unmanly, feminine trait, and he takes great pride in his reputation as a successful competitive wrestler as well as a feared warrior. However, as the narrative progresses, Okonkwo's identity as a prominent and respected man within the Umuofian society is gradually contested, and his status gradually decreased to the point to which he chooses to end his own life. This decline in character may be related to a deterioration in the main character's identity and psyche, which results in feelings of emasculation, a change in identity and self-perception that is arguably difficult to cope with for the proud and heroic man. As previously mentioned, there is however an additional perspective worth contemplating when attempting to analyze Okonkwo's progression, fate and final decision in *Things Fall Apart*. In the latter part of the narrative, Umuofia is gradually colonized by British settlers. The humiliation and assumed betrayal Okonkwo is subjected to during this part, arguably contributes to the assumed emasculation and subsequent decision to end his own life. Therefore, considering the purpose and thesis of this essay, if Okonkwo's feelings of emasculation ultimately cause Okonkwo's downfall and demise, feminist and postcolonial literary criticism theory are both necessary in order to make such an analysis.

3. Analysis

In this section, events concerning Okonkwo, his views on women and feminine aspects of life are presented. Additionally, what constitutes his personality through a gender perspective is presented in order to provide a more profound understanding of what makes Okonkwo the person and literary character that he is. Lastly, this section will

likewise contain events and passages which are arguably crucial in the main character's negative emotional progression, emasculation and subsequent demise.

3.1 What Motivates Okonkwo?

In the first chapter of the narrative, Achebe summarizes the aversion Okonkwo feels towards his deceased father, Unoka, who did not achieve any titles during his lifetime and was heavily in debt at the time of his demise (Achebe 7). Consequently, the narrator suggests that Unoka's assumed failure as a man is the reason for Okonkwo's ambitious and heroic aspirations, as well as his obsession with manly traits and achievements.

More precisely, Unoka was considered to be a lazy man who was barely able to provide for his wife and children and consequently became a subject of mockery in the village

(Achebe 5). Okonkwo was to a great extent influenced by the shame and dishonor his father brought on the family and therefore decided to become the opposite of his father.

Since contemporary Igbo traditions required that a man should be judged on the basis of his own achievements, not his father's (Achebe 8), Okonkwo was able to redeem

himself. In the initial chapter, Okonkwo is therefore presented as "well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" and that "his fame rested on solid

personal achievements" (Achebe 3). Additionally, the narrator states that Okonkwo was "clearly cut out for great things" and supports this fact by stating the following:

He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders

said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders.

(Achebe 8)

Clearly, this passage summarizes what are considered to be achievements worthy of admiration by a contemporary Igbo man. Furthermore, it provides the reader with the notion of what Okonkwo values in life. At the same time, the narrator indirectly provides the reader with the notion of what failure signifies to Okonkwo: to not achieve any titles, to not be considered brave and great, to not be what is considered manly.

3.2 The Cost of Manhood

In chapters four and five in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe establishes and assigns personal traits to Okonkwo which from a feminist literary criticism perspective would be considered to be sexist, as well as violent and frightened of appearing weak to an extent to which he is able to kill the ones he loves. In this first part of the narrative, Okonkwo not only beats two of his wives severely, but he likewise in a number of events suppresses his feelings toward Ikemefuna, the boy who is temporarily put in Okonkwo's custody, and who becomes like a son to him, in an attempt to not appear feminine.

Furthermore, in an attempt to discourage a man with lesser status, who dares to contradict him at a village meeting, Okonkwo answers him by stating that "this meeting is for men" (Achebe 25). By uttering these words while he simultaneously and demonstratively chooses to not even look at the man he addresses, Okonkwo clearly implies that this man possesses the status equal to a woman, which according to Okonkwo and contemporary Igbo culture is a lower social status. However, the narrator adds that Okonkwo's way to deal with men with lower status is not necessarily perceived as common practice by his peers. This is demonstrated by an elder who "was

struck, as most people were, by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing with less successful men" and furthermore by implying that Okonkwo had uttered those degrading words to the man who contradicted him in an attempt to "kill his spirit", which clearly is not considered the contemporary norm (Achebe 25).

The aforementioned events that demonstrate Okonkwo's emotionally suppressed nature are presented in chapter four through seven. In these chapters, the relationship between Okonkwo and his adopted son Ikemefuna is in focus and the narrator makes it evident that Okonkwo holds affectionate emotions towards him. However, being the emotionally suppressed man that he is, Okonkwo is not able to show his emotions because of a self-perceived risk to appear weak and feminine. This becomes clear when the narrator describes this warm and complex relationship by stating that "even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy – inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (Achebe 27). In this part the narrator adds that Okonkwo, soon after Ikemefuna's arrival at his home, treats him as a son and likewise that Ikemefuna addresses him as "father" (Achebe 27). Nevertheless, Okonkwo would not risk to appear weak, i.e. feminine, and therefore he will not allow himself to display these feelings publicly.

In chapter seven, which concludes the part including Ikemefuna in the narrative, a horrible event that clearly displays how far Okonkwo is willing to go in order to maintain what he considers to be manhood, is presented to the reader. In this part of the narrative, it is decided by the village oracle and spiritual leader that Ikemefuna must die. Since an oracle's wishes are not debatable within the local Igbo culture, Okonkwo is forced to comply even though he strongly disagrees. Okonkwo has, as previously mentioned, become emotionally attached to Ikemefuna at this point in the

narrative. Their strong bond is mainly constructed on Ikemefuna's positive influence on Okonkwo's oldest son, Nwoye, who in the company of Ikemefuna develops what according to Okonkwo and contemporary Igbo standards are considered favorable manly traits, and, consequently, a closer bond to his father. Okonkwo clearly acknowledges Ikemefuna's contributions and therefore becomes very fond of him (Achebe 49-50).

When Okonkwo is presented with the fact that Ikemefuna must be killed, he is also instructed by a respected elder to not take part in the killing of his adopted son due to their close bond. In this part of the narrative, Okonkwo beats his eldest son, Nwoye, for showing "weak" and "feminine" emotions when he realizes that Ikemefuna is about to leave them, even though he, initially, does not realize the full extent of the horrendous situation (Achebe 54). However, being exceedingly frightened to appear weak, Okonkwo chooses to take part in the event which arguably is the starting point of his negative emotional and psychological decline. The horrors Okonkwo evidently experiences during this event are in many senses summarized in the citation below:

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet[e] and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.

(Achebe 57)

The cost for not appearing weak and feminine is obviously immense for Okonkwo, but he cannot stand the thought of being feminine and emasculated. The relationship with Nwoye, who at this point has realized that Ikemefuna is dead, is shattered, even though

Okonkwo does not realize this at first. Additionally, Okonkwo descends into a depressive emotional state in which he does not sleep for days and is barely able to digest food. In a sense, Okonkwo's worst thinkable scenario, to be weak and emasculated, is now ironically becoming an undeniable fact to him. At this point in the narrative, following the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is evidently torn between his manly aspirations, the fear of being emasculated, and the guilt for killing his adopted son. This emotional contradictory state becomes, for example, evident in this following passage: "When did you become a shivering old woman,' Okonkwo asked himself, 'you are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war. How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed'" (Achebe 60-61).

As previously mentioned, Okonkwo does not hesitate to beat and abuse his wives to an extent to which he nearly kills them, something that becomes evident in chapters four and five. In a limited period of time during these chapters, Okonkwo firstly brutally beats his third and youngest wife, Ojiugo, because she was neglecting her duties as a wife by not providing him with dinner in time (Achebe 27-28). Furthermore, in this limited period of time, he also beats his second wife, Ekwefi, before he shoots at her and barely misses with his rifle (Achebe 37). In the situation involving this specific beating of Ekwefi, Okonkwo does not only beat and shoots at her for accidentally killing a banana tree, but he does so in the presence of his beloved favorite daughter and her only child, Ezinma, leaving them devastated, as well as in front of his other wives and spectators who do not dare to interfere. (Achebe 37). During this event, the narrator, however, reveals the true motive for the beating of Ekwefi, a motive which ultimately is related to frustration over matters not related to Ekwefi. This becomes clear through this statement preceding the beating: "Okonkwo, who had been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly

found an outlet” (Achebe 37). The way in which Okonkwo is depicted in this part of the narrative, clearly demonstrates his complex personality. In an attempt to not appear weak and feminine he is obviously willing to abuse and even kill people. However, even though Okonkwo, undoubtedly, is abusive to an extreme, his violent corrections and actions in general should likewise be evaluated from a contemporaneous and contextual perspective. In other words, domestic violence was not uncommon in the contemporary and highly patriarchal Igbo culture.

3.3 Okonkwo, Ekwefi and Ezinma

Even though the nature of the main character in Achebe’s novel is violent in general and sexist from a feminist literary criticism perspective, there are examples in the narrative other than the previously mentioned love for Ikemefuna, which display Okonkwo’s affectionate sides as well. Okonkwo’s love for his wife Ekwefi and their one common child, Ezinma, are examples of his ability to also show affectionate feelings toward women. An event that clearly displays the love he feels toward his favorite child and her mother, is presented in chapter nine through eleven when Ezinma becomes seriously ill and Okonkwo displays a rare case of gentleness and affection. In this part of the narrative, Ekwefi is devastated by the fact that her only surviving daughter is seriously ill and, consequently, that her daughter’s fate is placed in the hands of an assumed divine oracle. Okonkwo notices her anxiety and therefore decides to take Ekwefi’s place as a watchman outside the oracle’s cave. The purpose of the aforementioned action is to protect their only child from any bodily harm, which furthermore makes Ekwefi cry in a state of relief, knowing that her daughter is now safe (Achebe 103).

It becomes evident in the narrative that Okonkwo and Ekwefi’s relationship and marriage is unique in a sense that it is built on mutual love. It likewise becomes evident that Ekwefi does not necessarily fit the traditional patriarchal norms

and furthermore that her rather unique and untypical personal traits are attractive to Okonkwo. In chapter eleven, during the previously mentioned event outside the cave, Ekwefi reminisces about her and Okonkwo's love story which seems to be separate from Okonkwo's other marriages and the contemporary norm. In the case of Ekwefi and Okonkwo, their intense love story began when they were both young and Okonkwo was too poor to take a wife. Because of those conditions, Ekwefi was initially forced to marry another man whom she was married to for two years before running away; leaving him for her true love, Okonkwo (Achebe 103).

3.4 Okonkwo's Time in Exile

Another event of importance in *Things Fall Apart*, takes place in part two, chapter fourteen, when Okonkwo is according to tradition, forced to flee his clan and seek refuge in his mother's homeland during a time span of seven years, following a crime that he inadvertently commits. More precisely, the reason for Okonkwo's refuge is the accidental killing of a young man during the funeral of the young man's prominent father, Ezeudu. During this event, the narrator indicates that there are two types of killings a person could commit during these types of circumstances; a male or a female killing. Because Okonkwo's killing is accidental, it is viewed upon as female and therefore he immediately has to leave the clan in exile for at least seven years (Achebe 117).

During Okonkwo's time in exile, in at least some sense, Achebe seems to criticize certain patriarchal aspects of the Igbo culture, displayed by Okonkwo's actions and subsequent vindications, which are displayed and presented in the initial part of the narrative. The fact that Okonkwo, a man who according to his actions and way of thinking, strongly believes that men are superior to women, is forced to seek refuge in his mother's homeland, among his mother's kinsmen, seems to have a larger symbolic

value in the narrative. During his time in exile, discussions with his maternal uncle, Uchendu, make Okonkwo consider alternative perspectives and values of the feminine aspects of life. For example, during the wedding of Uchendu's son, Amikwu, his uncle states the following and additionally straightly asks Okonkwo the following question in front of the family and guests:

‘Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is in exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why is it that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or ‘Mother is Supreme’? We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka – ‘Mother is Supreme’. Why is that?’.

(Achebe 125)

The previous statement forces Okonkwo to admit that he has not considered this question, or feminine aspects of life rather, leaving him with no other option than to tell his uncle that he does not know the answer to his question. Consequently, Uchendu does not only provide him with an answer, but also with guidance and arguably an attempt to a greater life lesson as well. From a feminist literary criticism perspective this event possesses high value because Achebe in this part in the narrative makes an important point of the strength of the maternal and feminine aspects of Okonkwo's life. During Okonkwo's time in exile, his aforementioned

loving relationship to Ezinma grows even stronger, as well as his view of his other daughter, Obiageli. When contemplating his favorite child and her sister, Okonkwo states that he is very privileged to have two promising daughters even though “he never stopped regretting that Ezinma was a girl” because of their unique and special bond (Achebe 162). It now becomes evident to Okonkwo, as well as the reader, that none of his sons could ever reach the same level of love and affection to him as Ezinma and consequently that Okonkwo is able to love and respect a girl or a woman as much as a man or a boy.

3.5 Okonkwo’s Return to Umuofia and Subsequent Demise

During his seven years in exile, Okonkwo makes detailed plans for his return to Umuofia in order to re-establish his degraded reputation, regain his social status and fight the colonizers who at this point have forced themselves and their customs on Umuofia. In chapter twenty, while still in exile, Okonkwo also becomes aware of the fact that his eldest son, Nwoye, to his father’s strong disapproval and shame has converted to Christianity. Because of this disgrace, Okonkwo gathers his remaining sons and states the following: “You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him” (Achebe 162). Through this cited passage, it becomes evident, that even though Okonkwo’s view of women and feminine aspects of life are somewhat altered, it is not enough to break the connection between the weak and the feminine. Additionally, the fight for freedom from the colonizers and preservation of the domestic culture and traditions now have become personal for Okonkwo.

The return to Umuofia is not what Okonkwo had expected, though.

Among other immense alterations within the society, a church has been built, to which

also prominent men like himself now have converted. One specific example mentioned in the narrative is Ogbuefi Ugonna, who in likeness with Okonkwo has taken several titles within the clan. In this part of the narrative, it is said that Ogbuefi had “cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians” (Achebe 163). On the basis of how important titles are to Okonkwo, and how closely connected they are to his self-perceived notion of manhood, it is needless to say that this specific case of conversion terrifies Okonkwo and adds yet another layer of fear of being emasculated and subsequent hatred toward his antagonists and oppressors.

Apart from the addition of a church, the most crucial colonial and Christian additions in Umuofia during the time for Okonkwo’s return is the presence of a courthouse, a Christian school, jail and governmental courthouse to which Umuofians now were expected to adhere. Being the proud warrior that he is, Okonkwo neither adheres to nor respects this colonial government.

When contemplating the fact that an uprising or outright war is more complicated than he initially thought, due to the fact that Umuofians to a great extent had chosen to adapt and convert to the colonial way of life, the narrator makes the following assertion: “Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women” (Achebe 173). This passage, from chapter twenty-one in the narrative, clearly demonstrates the emotional and psychological state Okonkwo now has transformed into. He is obviously in grief and he once more uses the feminine to describe what is weak and denotes failure to him. The fear and sense of being emasculated and powerless is arguably becoming a reality to him at this point in the narrative.

Okonkwo’s feelings of emasculation are reinforced by a critical event that occurs in the latter part of the narrative. In this event, Okonkwo and five other leaders of

Umuofia are imprisoned for burning down the colonial Christian church, in an attempt to satisfy their native God and sacred spirits (Achebe 181). During the days in imprisonment, the men are subjected to physical, as well as mental abuse, in an attempt by the colonial District Commissioner to make the men accept a fine by which they are supposed to be released. In this situation, Okonkwo's psychological state yet again alters. In conjunction with the preceding event, in which the leading men decided to burn down the church, Okonkwo's hope and mood progress in a positive manner. However, after being subjected to degrading and shameful abuse during his time of imprisonment, as well as not achieving the preferable response when attempting to convince other leading men to revolt, Okonkwo's psychological state changes once again. When planning his retaliation on the white men who imprisoned him, Okonkwo in his bitterness and once again altered psychological state, reminisces about wars he fought in his youth and the lack of manliness and manly actions during the present ongoing occupation of their land:

Worthy men are no more,' Okonkwo sighed as he remembered those days. 'Isike will never forget how we slaughtered them in that war. We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace. Those were the days when men were men'.

(Achebe 189-190)

In passages like this one, it becomes evident that Okonkwo now has fallen into a state of powerlessness and impotence. It becomes obvious that his emasculated situation does not correspond to his self-perceived manly and potent image of himself in the initial part of the narrative. Likewise, the worst possible scenario for Okonkwo has now

become reality. At this point Okonkwo is in likeness with his deceased father, weak and feminine i.e. a failure, and consequently his worst fear has now become a fact. From a feminist literary criticism perspective, Okonkwo now has progressed from being strong, rational and emotionally stoic, as well as protective and decisive, to submissive, irrational and weak, within the context of a patriarchal system, as defined by Tyson (Tyson 81). Additionally, as previously mentioned in the method section of this essay, Tyson indicates that men within a patriarchal system are not permitted to fail at anything and likewise that failure denotes failure in one's manhood (83). Therefore, Okonkwo, could be considered to be emasculated at this point in the narrative, and a failure according to himself, because of his inability to measure up to his predetermined gender role as well as his own self-perceived notion of male superiority.

In a last attempt to preserve his own and his village pride, Okonkwo chooses to participate in a village meeting in which they are supposed to decide to whether or not wage war against their oppressors. During this meeting, Okonkwo in a state of rage beheads the District Commissioner's messenger. However, when the rest of his clansmen chooses to let the rest of the messengers escape, Okonkwo finally realizes that the war is already lost and consequently he chooses to leave the meeting in silence, preparing for his final solution (Achebe 194). From a postcolonial literary criticism perspective, Okonkwo now experiences an identity formation, which according to McLeod is equivalent to dehumanization, objectification and emasculation, considering that he no longer is part of the ruling class (McLeod 22-23). Furthermore, Okonkwo could experience feelings of inferiority, isolation and emasculation as defined and described by Fanon (Fanon 112-114).

4. Conclusion

In this section, the findings that support the thesis that feelings of emasculation cause Okonkwo's downfall and demise are summarized and connected to the theory. In section 3.1 of the analysis, Okonkwo's relationship with his deceased father, Unoka, and what subsequently motivates him in life are presented. The shame Unoka brought on the young Okonkwo by not achieving any titles, as well as the poverty and mockery that followed, are important factors in order to comprehend what motivates Okonkwo and why manliness, according to contemporary Igbo standards, is highly important to him. Moreover, this initial section of the analysis provides information about Okonkwo's view on feminine aspects of life, which to him are related to his father's shortcomings and accordingly denotes failure and weakness to him. Therefore, on the basis of the facts presented in that section, one could make the argument that Okonkwo is terrified of appearing to be what he considers to be weak, helpless and feminine.

In section 3.2 of the analysis the extent to which Okonkwo is willing to go in order to maintain his status as a prominent man within his clan, as well as his self-perceived notion of manliness, are presented. Okonkwo is willing to physically and verbally abuse his wives for talking back at him or disregarding their chores, as well as discourage other men from contradicting him publicly. In this section it also becomes evident that Okonkwo is prepared to brutally kill his loved ones in order to maintain this status and notion of manliness. Even though Okonkwo clearly considers actions like these as actions of manliness, his peers do not necessarily agree and, moreover, Okonkwo's violent actions plunge him into a depressive emotional state. On the basis of the facts presented in section 3.2, it becomes evident that the previously mentioned fear of appearing weak takes extreme proportions in Okonkwo's case, and the extent to which he is willing to proceed in order to maintain his manly appearance, becomes obvious.

However, considering the fact that Okonkwo does not approve of the killing of Ikemefuna, even though he participates anyway, one could make the argument that Okonkwo is a victim to an involuntary, predetermined and highly patriarchal gender role position, through a feminist literary theory perspective. According to Lois Tyson a man within such a patriarchal system is supposed to be strong and decisive, as well as emotionally stoic and show no sign of weakness (83). This contemporaneous and patriarchal ideal is something Okonkwo does not fully live up to during this horrifying event and therefore this event alters his state of mind to an uncomfortable and emasculated sense of self.

In section 3.3 of the analysis, examples of Okonkwo's more affectionate sides are presented. The love Okonkwo feels toward Ekwefi and their common child, Ezinma, clearly represents those kinds of affectionate sides which, besides the narrative concerning them, are uncommon within the novel. However, it is not a fair depiction of Okonkwo to solely indicate that he is a purely biased, sexist and violent man, because he is a far more complex literary character. In the chapters concerning Ezinma it becomes evident to the reader that Okonkwo is more than capable of loving as well as respecting women. The facts presented in section 3.3 in many senses represent the complex aspects of Okonkwo's characteristics which make Achebe's main character likeable. Because even though Okonkwo has quite extensive flaws in his character, he is unquestionably a hero of sorts. He also represents the proud native African man who does not submit to a foreign government and is a preserver of a proud historical native culture.

In section 3.4, Okonkwo's time in exile is presented. The reason for Okonkwo's exile and refuge in his mother's homeland is the accidental killing of a young man during a funeral. Because the killing is viewed as a "feminine" crime against Igbo laws, Okonkwo is forced into exile during a time span of seven years. At this point

in the narrative, it becomes evident that Achebe is now focusing on the strengths of what is considered feminine by making his hero consider female aspects of life from a vigorous and significant point of view. During this part of the narrative, Okonkwo's love for his two daughters and disappointment in his oldest son becomes apparent. However, Okonkwo does not seem to be able to adhere to a more humble perspective on himself and consequently plans for a grand return to Umuofia, which includes him taking more titles within the clan and fighting off the British settlers who in Okonkwo's absence have colonized his village. Given the facts presented in this section of the analysis, one could make the argument that the narrator at this point provides Okonkwo with the insights and option to embrace the strengths of what is considered feminine, even though he only partly chooses to do so. Okonkwo's love for his daughters now becomes apparent. However, a great portion of his time in exile is dedicated to plans of a great return to Umuofia in which he plans to take even more titles within his clan, as well as waging a war on the British settlers, which in Okonkwo's case signifies a brave, resourceful and masculine return.

In section 3.5 of the analysis, the crucial events including the degrading imprisonment of Okonkwo and fellow prominent tribesmen and inability to wage war on their oppressors are accounted for. During these degrading events it becomes evident that Okonkwo now has turned into a state of hopelessness and weakness. It is now clear that he transformed into the failure he associates with his father in the sense that he is not able to solve the situation in what he considers to be a masculine manner.

Emasculated and degraded by British colonizers, through a postcolonial literary criticism perspective, Okonkwo now in likeness with Fanon (1952) has transformed into the emasculated and dehumanized "other". Additionally, in accordance with patriarchal structures defined by Tyson (2015), Okonkwo is not able to maintain his status as a man; thus, he has become a failure.

Considering the facts and events presented in the analysis, it is possible to make the argument that Okonkwo's transformation from a potent, heroic and powerful leading man of Umuofia to an impotent and helpless character who is not able to solve his issues using brute force, is more than he is able to cope with and therefore could explain his final decision to end his life. The events involving Ikemefuna initiates a negative emotional development within him. His forced exile and the eldest son's conversion to Christianity are likewise events in the narrative which contribute to his transformation and character development. Lastly, the degrading treatment he experiences from the colonizers also contributes to his emasculated and helpless state of mind. The connection between failure and what is feminine, likewise transforms Okonkwo into the emasculated image of himself that terrifies him the most.

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