

**MASCULINITY AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* - A STUDY**

**Dr.T.Selvakkumar**

*Assistant Professor*

PG & Research Department of English

A.V.V.M Sri Pushpam College (Autonomous)

(Affiliated by Bharathidasan University, Trichy)

NAAC- Reaccredited at 'A' Grade with 3.38 points

Poondi- 613503. Thanjavur (Dist)

---

**ABSTRACT:** *The African people have varying behaviors, mannerisms, beliefs, thought patterns and way of interaction and all of these differences formed their culture and impacted their way of life. However, with the coming of the Europeans of Africa came cultural infiltration, pollution as well as alteration. This paper analyses Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart from the angle of masculinity and cultural clash as brought about by Westernization. The method of investigation is analytical and descriptive, using the formalist approach: that is looking at the actions, events, sentences and interactions of the characters in order to identify and discuss how males are portrayed, paying attention to issues of cultural realism, behaviors, actions and statements of the characters. The findings of the paper confirmed that African viewpoint of masculinity and cultural tends to be opposed to that of the Europeans, as the action and behaviors appropriate to a man in each society tend to differ. This led to different clashes from religious, cultural, ideological, to social beliefs. the conclusion that cultural clashes exist in the work and contributed to the final play out of the story, where the traditional belief system had to make way for Western ones; making things fall apart. The paper reveals that the male characters have both cultural and individual masculine idiosyncrasies and that the complexities of male roles confirm the pluralistic and slippery nature of masculinity.*

**KEY WORDS:** gender, discourse, Africa, Sexuality, hegemony.

---

## INTRODUCTION

The theme of clash of culture in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is not new as several scholars have written severally on the title, what is however new is the treatment of Masculinity and how it affects or contributes of Cultural clash in the text. The paper reviews the discourses of masculinity and cultural clash by gendering the two societies in focus like Western culture and African Traditional culture to ascertain which is masculine and which is feminine. It looks at the traits and qualities of these two societies and compares these traits from the lens of traditional gender roles. The study X-rays cultural and masculinity as a cultural and social reality visible and permissible in Igbo land of Nigeria before and during the colonial era of the Europeans as reflected in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The study of the novel, some critics believe, is the study of the society from which it emerges. African literary scene, Chinua Achebe is one of the most vociferous writers in Africa on the role that literature plays in the society. The style of Achebe's fiction draws heavily on the oral tradition of the Igbo people, as he weaves folktales into the fabric of his stories, revealing community values in both the content and the form of the storytelling. The tale about the Earth and Sky in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, emphasis the interdependency of the masculine and the feminine, as the earth needs raindrops and sunshine from the sky to flourish. This cultural belief but it is also a reality of life. Several things need to each gender has a definite role to play for the unity and advancement of the society in which they belong and every society has its own traditional gender roles. If viewed on the surface, the story line of *Things Fall Apart*

is a tragedy, but when viewed in a wider perspective, it is a story of deeper conflict as the underlying issue is culture clash between traditional and western, masculinity and femininity, and this is the whole essence of this paper.

### **Masculinity and Cultural clash in *Things Fall Apart*:**

The beliefs of Okonkwo on the handling and treatment of issues termed feminine are not a cultural belief, but personal as other successful and prosperous men are observed not to share in his handling of some societal issues. The beating of women, the involvement in the killing of Ikemefuna, the agitation to wage war against the white missionary in both Umuofia and Mbanta were some of the issues where Okonkwo did not have full support from other men in the society, and his reason for terming them 'effeminate'. Okonkwo is the opinion that traditional men have lost their place in society and cannot be termed 'worthy' anymore as Western culture has softened their resolve; men have been turned to weaklings by colonization and the white man's religion. Umuofia, a man who seemed to have been assimilated into beliefs of the colonizers becomes Okonkwo's greatest obstacle as 'when he speaks, he moves our men to impotence'. An adage says that 'a man cannot go to war against a clan and win', Okonkwo is however seen taking the supposed societal abuse into his own hand by avenging himself as against the wish and desire of the clan. He kills the messenger of the Whiteman who tries to stop the clans' meeting; but as the other messengers escape, he knew Umuofia would not go to war.

Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult (144-145). As a result of this action, he realizes he is on his own and will not get any protection from the society, thus commits the abominable act of hanging himself. This act of hanging is itself cowardice and contravenes the belief of the same society he claims to be protecting. Only a weakling commits suicide in Igbo traditional context. Thus here, can it be said that Okonkwo is a weakling when it comes to anger and temper management? Or that it is the psychological trauma/torture that he cannot withstand? Every gender, male or female has a positive and a negative attribute, thus these weak attributes of Okonkwo can be termed, from normative point of view, the negative masculine attributes. Language is the very first link between people as it is their identity. People easily connect with someone who understands the other individual's language forms a barrier that will need to be broken. If you do not understand the language of a people, the tendency is high that you will not understand their culture and share their beliefs. This lack of common language results in a division in understanding that would impinge on legal, religious and cultural appreciation. With the arrival of the Europeans came new laws and religion, thus a cultural conflict. Consequently, when referring to Okonkwo's act of beating up his wife, one notices the existence of a disparity.

A cultural division such as this separates the two cultures and leads to an ethnocentric approach to dealing with each other. What might appear to be the correct solution by one group (masculine or feminine) is harsh and unacceptable by another. Although the tribal law which is masculine in nature is termed harsh, the European effeminate law is not in any way better. This is expected to happen as the belief system of both cultures (gender) does not agree on several things in the first instance. The religious views of both groups are totally contradictory: while in the African (masculine) context one has to make sacrifices of animals (sometimes humans) as the circumstances requires, in the European (feminine) context one does not need to shed any blood especially as Jesus Christ already shed his blood on the Cross of Calvary. This one time shedding of blood is not the belief of the Igbos. In marriage, an Igbo man may marry as many wives as he desires, a masculine trait, while in the European context, polygamy is frowned at. What will constitute an offence in some parts embraced by others? At this point, one begins to wonder who is masculine and who is effeminate between these two groups of men the senior

African men or the junior men. Things have indeed fallen apart among the men of the clan and the center is not holding, but only a certain man who refuses to change because of his belief that he must always be seen as masculine, suffer the consequences: 'A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and bitterer when a man fails alone' (18). This is pointer that when a society fails, the proud has a hiding place; however, nobody can be blamed for personal failures except that individual himself.

## CONCLUSION

It is obvious that the main character in the text, Okonkwo represent the Traditional masculine culture while the white colonizers represent the Western effeminate culture. There were several gendered clashes in the culture of the two societies, which are majorly social language, religion and total way to life. *Things fall apart* as both societies cannot agree on views about the cultural, social and gender view as of their people. The conflict really is not between male and female, masculinity and Femininity, rather it is about cultural ideas and beliefs about masculinity. Okonkwo, a traditional masculine man, not fitting into the new effeminate way of life, commits suicide; the traditional society continues to lose its young men and women to the new religion, young men attend schools rather than go to the farm, traditional sacrifices become outlawed while younger men begin to disrespect their elders. The system clash and everything seems to fail. The Western colonizers are to blame for the collapse of the African system as they came uninvited and then dominated the people and their beliefs. The colonial conquest helped undermine the authority and power base of senior men as young men challenge titled chiefs and father, attacking the dominate idea of masculinity.

The battle between masculinity and femininity are socially constructed ideas which tend to vary from people to people, place to place and even individual to individual. African viewpoint of masculinity and culture tends to be opposed to that of the Europeans, as the actions and behaviors appropriate to man in each society tend to differ. This led to different clashes from religious, cultural, ideological, to social beliefs. The research concludes that masculine cultural clashes exist in the work and contributed to the final play-out of the story, where the traditional masculine belief system had to make way for western effeminate ones; making things (cultural beliefs) fall apart. The research reveals that the male characters have both cultural and individual masculine idiosyncrasies as African male characters in the text Okonkwo, Nwoye, messengers, Obierika, other titled men tend to differ and react differently to the new western ideologies.

## References:

- [1] Achebe C (1964). *The Role of the Writer in a New Nation*. New York Print.
- [2] Achebe C (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. Anchor Books New York Print.
- [3] Achebe C (1984). *Things Fall Apart*. Lagos: Academic Press Ltd; Print.
- [4] Gikandi S (1987). *Reading the African Novel*. London: James Curry; Print.
- [5] Gikandi S (1991). *Reading Chinua Achebe*. London: James Curry; Print.