

FEAR, REJECTION, AND THE ARMOR OF MANHOOD: A PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF DEFENSIVE MASCULINITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

The present paper provides the psychoanalytical interpretation of Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe, focusing on the ways how the unconscious fear, childhood humiliation, and emotional repression determine the self-destruction of the hero of this work, Okonkwo. Diverging from the postcolonial approach to the novel as well as the cultural interpretation of its characters' behavior, the current analysis uses Anna Freud's concept of ego defense mechanisms and explain their role in shaping the psychology of Okonkwo. The paper demonstrates that Okonkwo's masculine identity is rather a protective mechanism that is fueled by the deep fear of resembling his weak and unsuccessful father – Unoka. With the help of the defense mechanisms of reaction formation, projection, and emotional isolation, Okonkwo manages to hide his own weaknesses and vulnerability to refuse accepting anything which might be perceived by him as something feminine and delicate, and even to transfer his fears to other people, mostly to his son Nwoye. Utilizing the qualitative method of close textual analysis, the paper concludes that this psychological shell cannot survive the impact of social and colonial changes, and its destruction, not the colonials' presence, results in Okonkwo's bursts of violence and death.

Keywords: Defensive Masculinity, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Unconscious Fear, Repression, Defense Mechanisms, Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe

1. Introduction

Masculinity, as defined by culture, often becomes associated with qualities of emotional stoicism, toughness, dominance, and control. When such cultural expectations crystallize into strict social codes, people start internalizing them as a kind of psychological armor, relying on a show of gender to mask their vulnerability (Freud 28, 36; Tyson 23). One such literary case of this phenomenon can be found in the novel Things Fall Apart written by Chinua Achebe. Although Things Fall Apart is widely known and rightfully praised as a portrayal of a pre-colonial Igbo culture and its collapse in the face of British colonization and evangelization, it is also a psychological story of a man haunted by an unspoken fear.

From the very beginning of the novel, Achebe lays out the psychological trauma which shapes the personality of Okonkwo: fear of being like his father, Unoka, who was a meek, musical, but unsuccessful man, ridiculed in the village for being lazy and indebted. The traumatic experience in his childhood pushes Okonkwo to adopt a character marked by aggressiveness, repression of feelings, and complete dismissal of any manifestation of softness or femininity. In this essay, psychoanalytic criticism is applied, utilizing the theories of Sigmund Freud and, in particular, Anna Freud's concepts of ego defense mechanisms developed in her work "The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense." According to Lois Tyson, psychoanalysis focuses on the repressed needs, fears, and defense mechanisms of the ego (Tyson 23).

Central to this framework is the notion of the defense mechanism, which refers to the psychological method that protects one's self from anxiety. In this framework, the rigid actions of Okonkwo are not merely reflective of the cultural norms of the society—that is, cultural norms reflected even by respected elders like Obierika and Uchendu (Freud 76)—but

rather they symbolize a psychological shield that Okonkwo needs in order to protect his weak sense of self.

Things Fall Apart, for decades, has been read through a variety of lenses, primarily postcolonialism, culture, and gender studies. The former is used by Osei-Nyame for the study of patriarchal power dynamics, the latter by Jeyifo who focuses on the marginalization of female characters in the text, while Anyokwu and Maduagwu focus on gender and cultural constructions of heroism and masculine identity. Moreover, within Pakistani scholarship, stereotypical masculine characteristics and structural representations of gender have been analyzed by Ahmad and Baig, as well as Shouq and Zubair. All of these analyses point to the external influences shaping the social norms of Umuofia collectively, yet fail to theoretically engage, using the language of psychoanalysis, why Okonkwo so destructively internalizes all of these pressures. While Okonkwo's fear of his father's legacy remains consistent throughout all this scholarship, it was never critically analyzed in the language of psychoanalysis. This article seeks to fill this theoretical gap by looking into the psychoanalytical intersection of fear, rejection, and defense, and thus prove the insecurities of Okonkwo's manhood.

In this regard, the article aims to achieve two objectives that are linked to one another; the first is to analyze the influence of fear and rejection on Okonkwo's thinking, interactions, and behavior, while the second objective is to explore how his masculinity acts as a psychological defense mechanism. These two objectives are reflected in the two research questions posed below: In what ways do fear and rejection influence the personality and behavior of Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart? And how does his masculinity act as a psychological defense mechanism in the novel? The structure of the rest of the article goes like this: section two introduces the article in the context of literature on the novel. Section three describes the psychoanalytic approach used for the study, based on Anna Freud's ego defense mechanisms and the notion of defensive masculinity.

2. Literature Review

There is no shortage of critical writing produced by Things Fall Apart due to its engagement with issues of colonial disturbance, culture, gender, folklore, and mental disintegration. This section reviews the different approaches that have been used to analyze this novel, before proceeding to define the research gap.

2.1 Postcolonial Discourse and Cultural Conflict

There is also extensive criticism on the novel as a direct reply to the misrepresentations made by colonialists about Africa. According to Al-Ghammaz, the author of Things Fall Apart creates a picture of organized Igbo community with its own religion, laws and morality to counter the idea promoted by Europeans about culturally empty Africans (Al-Ghammaz 375-76). Similar points are put forward by Pala Mull, who states that the author of the novel documents the history of Igbo people honestly and not in a biased way in order to prove Western readers that Igbo society is democratic and organized (Pala Mull 93-98). The same theme is continued by Ilyas, who notes that colonialism works culturally as well as militarily through religion and education, leading to erosion of local belief system from the inside – which allows Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, to find salvation in Christianity (Ilyas 76-77).

The works of other scholars further undermine the idea of external breakdown of the Igbo society. According to Hajo, the disintegration of Igbo culture is not a feature of the process since the Igbo people adapt themselves rather than break apart, while the one who breaks apart is Okonkwo, and the disintegration starts from the moment he murders Ikemefuna (Hajo 452-54). In their analysis, Varadharajan and Ramesh argue that Okonkwo's fall is both social, psychological, and cultural, and is largely caused by his fear of becoming like his father (Varadharajan & Ramesh 151-52).

2.2 Folklore, Masculinity, and Gender

Folklore, proverb, and oral storytelling are highlighted as repositories of communal memory and moral teachings in the novel by Bawa, Essobiyou, and Likambantién, pointing out the fact that Okonkwo's preference for war-like stories to the more serene stories loved by Nwoye is a sign of his disinterest in cultural matters (Bawa et al. 26–28). Regarding masculinity, Lipenga discusses the fact that masculinity in the novel is socially constructed rather than a natural aspect of being male; this kind of masculinity is constructed by Okonkwo himself as the opposite of his father's (Lipenga 26–28). Siddique demonstrates the importance of physical prowess and dominance in Umuofia that makes Okonkwo practice excessive self-control (Siddique 11–12), whereas Löfstedt suggests that Okonkwo transforms common cultural norms in something toxic, employing self-control in order to compensate for his childhood trauma that made him able to feel anger but not love (Löfstedt 1–4).

Moreover, gender criticism goes to show the price paid for this masculine archetype. The authors Ijem and Agbo illustrate the way the novel's language is always associating masculinity with strength and dominance while women are portrayed as weak and silenced (Ijem and Agbo 55–56), which Okonkwo has so deeply ingrained in himself that anything associated with femininity is seen by him as failure. The critic Jeyifo draws attention to the almost complete lack of mention of Okonkwo's mother throughout the story, just like the lack of representation of feminine ideals that nevertheless are crucial for psychological harmony (Jeyifo 847–49). And finally, Tugume makes his criticism of the portrayal of children like Ikemefuna, the twins, and Nwoye.

2.3 Psychoanalytic and Social-Psychological Readings

One more focused set of studies looks at Okonkwo psychoanalytically. Nweke claims that Okonkwo lacks the patience and wisdom necessary to be a real hero, and his rageful behavior is the result of repression—Okonkwo's projection of his hidden feelings of shame on women, children, and weaker men (Nweke 14–15). Cowlin considers Okonkwo's excessive pride, desire for control and uncontrollable rage manifestations of his fear, which is connected to Okonkwo's childhood experiences with his father (Cowlin 2–5). Abussamen and Neimneh apply the psychoanalytic approach to the entire novel by analyzing Achebe's ambivalence towards colonial education and his own Igbo culture (Abussamen and Neimneh 215–17). Ulogu views Okonkwo's life as the conflict between the desire for fame and fear of shame, and states that it was not the principle but Okonkwo's fear of public humiliation that made him take part in killing Ikemefuna (Ulogu 15–16). Haque presents this psychological approach in the wider context of social psychology and discusses the colonial disruption of the fragile structure of Okonkwo's mind and life in Umuofia, where people were not able to accept the marginal members of their society (Haque 9–10).

2.4 Synthesis and Research Gap

Collectively, then, this body of literature shows how *Things Fall Apart* supports readings that are simultaneously postcolonial, cultural, gendered, and psychological in nature. Most critics concur that Okonkwo's masculinity is artificial as opposed to being natural and point to how this is linked to the psychological dimension of Okonkwo's interactions with Unoka. The one thing that remains unexplored about this topic, however, is the use of a particular psychoanalytical language, particularly the use of Anna Freud's concept of ego defense mechanisms in the explanation of why fear turns into rejection, which turns into performance, which then turns into violence. Also, Okonkwo's failure has not been juxtaposed with Obierika's, Uchendu's, and Ekwefi's more balanced strength. This article addresses both issues.

3. Theoretical Framework

In this case, psychoanalytical criticism does not view characters as simply instruments for furthering plot but sees them as psychologically complex characters with an unconscious mind, which is full of hidden memories, anxiety, and experiences from childhood (Tyson). This section identifies those psychoanalytical concepts on the basis of which the analysis is conducted in Section 5.

3.1 Repression and Anxiety

Unconscious acts as a container for all the painful facts that are too scary to live in consciousness; their removal from consciousness is repression. But repressed things are never forgotten – they just appear in the form of anxiety, which arises in the case of re-emergence of suppressed fears. If one has experienced shame and fear of being rejected at an early stage of his/her life, this fear usually appears in the form of the development of an unbreakable identity in order to make oneself feel safe from it.

3.2 Anna Freud's Ego Defense Mechanisms

Anna Freud's work *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* explains how the ego deals with anxiety, and three of these defense mechanisms are particularly important in this case. Overcompensation and reaction formation happen when a person covers up an embarrassing internal feeling by doing the exact opposite externally, for example, a person who is afraid of being weak, he shows aggression as an overcompensation. Projection is when a person denies their own insecurities and projects the same flaw onto other people, usually a child or someone else that depends on them, thus projecting their self-image into another form.

3.3 Defensive Masculinity

The fusion of psychoanalysis with the notion of gender creates the notion of “defensive masculinity,” which is a construction of masculinity based on fear and insecurity. Since masculinity is constructed as a state of physical strength, dominance, and emotional control, while femininity is constructed as weakness and vulnerability, an individual whose self-image is damaged might start viewing normal emotional sensitivity as a mortal danger. Hence, the resulting identity is formed around the notions of dominance and discipline with no room for weakness.

3.4 Applying the Framework to *Things Fall Apart*

The particular psychological sequence at work in the portrayal of Okonkwo includes fear of weakness leading to anxiety and shame; anxiety and shame leading to a rejection of softness and the father who personifies it; this rejection takes place through defensive masculinity; and failure of defensive masculinity leads to violence and ultimate defeat. In contrast to interpretations which see Okonkwo's aggressive behavior as mere conformity to the dictates of the culture of Umuofia, this interpretation sees the behavior as a compensation mechanism for an injury which his fellow culture heroes such as Obierika and Uchendu do not have to deal with in the same harsh manner. Whereas his fellow men are able to feel compassion, grief, and wisdom without fear of damaging their masculinity, Okonkwo is not because his brand of masculinity is only a fragile protective covering. The analysis done in Section 5 interprets this sequence through the specific situations involving Okonkwo, Unoka, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's wives, and Uchendu among others.

4. Methodology

The research utilizes a qualitative approach to literary analysis that focuses on close reading instead of relying on empirical methods in psychology like clinical interviews and experimentation. The process of analysis entails going through the main scenes and dialogues as well as the relationships between characters in *Things Fall Apart* in light of Anna Freud's theories on ego defense mechanisms and defensive masculinity, which was discussed in Section 3. The process of analysis is structured according to the stages of the psychological

process listed above: from Okonkwo's underlying fear of being like Unoka, to the anxiety and shame that come from it, the rejection of softness within and outside oneself, the formation of a masculine defense mechanism as a result of the rejection, and its collapse into violence and tragedy.

This research is limited to Okonkwo's characterization and his interactions with Unoka, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, his wives, and Uchendu, but does not encompass the entire corpus of Achebe's works.

5. Textual Analysis

The following is an exploration of the psychological order in Section 3 through the passage: Fear of being weak and ashamed; rejection of softness and fatherhood; overcompensation; projection onto others; especially on Nwoye; strict separation of male and female; emotional repression; use of violence as a means of self-protection; and finally, the failure of repression ending up with the death of Ikemefuna, Nwoye, and Okonkwo himself.

5.1 Fear of Weakness and Shame

Achebe explicitly says, "Okonkwo's whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness," and "It was not external but lay deep within himself" (Achebe 14). More specifically, Okonkwo's fear was the fear of "himself, for fear he might turn out to be like his father" (Achebe 14). Unoka is described as the opposite of what the people of Umuofia are—the kind of person who is ridiculed as "a loafer, who neither works nor fights. And because he had no titles, he was heavily in debt" (Achebe 7–9). A rhetorical question asked by Achebe, "Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?" (Achebe 9), points out this feeling of shame as the root emotion that made Okonkwo who he was. Psychoanalytically, Okonkwo repressed this shame rather than dealing with it.

5.2 Rejection of Softness and the Father

Okonkwo's psychological framework is premised on negation: "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved," including, "gentleness and idleness" (Achebe 15). Since gentleness is associated with Unoka, Okonkwo ends up viewing it as dangerous and, thus, closes off an entire dimension of emotions. Okonkwo's excessive hard work, which he performs "like one possessed" (Achebe 20), is associated with fear: he does what he does out of fear of his father's shameful death and a contemptible life (Achebe 20). Okonkwo's public successes are, therefore, tied to a personal wound that they cover up.

5.3 Defensive Masculinity and Overcompensation

The fame of Okonkwo—"he was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond, his fame rising like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (Achebe 6)—is tied to accomplishments which function both as psychological compensations. His titles as a wrestler, success as a farmer and reputation as "a man of action, a man of war" (Achebe 12) are invariably contrasted with his father: "Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood" (Achebe 12). Even his impatience follows the same logic of over-compensation: whenever "his words were not fast enough," Achebe writes, "he would use his fists" (Achebe 6), substituting argumentation with physical aggression. The success of Okonkwo as a farmer, which proves that "he was not afraid of hard work" (Achebe 23), and his willpower as "his inflexible will" (Achebe 25), which allowed him to endure difficult situations, prove to be his downfall: the very rigidity, which made him successful also left no place for emotional flexibility.

5.4 Projection and the Attack on Weakness

In this context, it can be argued that Okonkwo's intolerance of failure in others is a projection on their part. According to Achebe, "He had no patience with unsuccessful men, just as he had had none with his father" (Achebe 6). This indicates displacement rather than an attempt to find fault. In an assembly where a man without a title questioned him, he dismisses him, saying: "This assembly is for men." And according to the narrator: "Without a title was the

same thing as being a woman in his eyes" (Achebe 28). Okonkwo makes a very important projection in his dealings with his son Nwoye, who reminds him of his father due to his sensitivity and therefore causes him "great anxiety" (Achebe 15).

5.5 The Masculine–Feminine Binary

The psychological makeup of Okonkwo is predicated on a stark dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. As the narrator notes, the word "agbala" refers to "a woman," but can also refer to "a man who had taken no title" (Achebe 15). In Chinua Achebe's work, the notion that a man who "cannot rule his women and his children" is not "really a man" (Achebe 51) makes clear just how integral control of the home is to Okonkwo's masculine identity. The young Nwoye embraces this dichotomy, albeit out of necessity, by internalizing the idea that "it was right to be masculine and to be violent," keeping his love for his mother's tales secret "as no longer his own" (Achebe 51–52). Ezinma is similarly subject to this dichotomy in her being reproached for sitting inappropriately ("Sit like a woman!"), and forbidden from engaging in what has been identified as a boy's task ("No, that is a boy's job") (Achebe 43).

5.6 Emotional Repression and Denial of Affection

"Achebe makes it clear that Okonkwo 'never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger,' since 'to show affection was a sign of weakness' and 'the only thing worth demonstrating was strength'" (Achebe 29). Although it does not do away with emotion, this is a code of suppression that hides rather than negates the emotion. Okonkwo is "very fond of Ikemefuna" but only "inwardly" since, despite the fact that "there was no doubt that he liked the boy," he still treats him "with a heavy hand" (Achebe 29). He shows a similar attitude towards his daughter, Ezinma.

5.7 Violence as Defense

Suppression of fear manifests itself time after time through violence at home. According to Achebe, "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand" and his wives "lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper" (Achebe 14). Moreover, Okonkwo's reaction to his wife's question—"Do what you are told, woman" (Achebe 16)—reveals his unwillingness to accept any challenge to his dominance. Okonkwo beats his wife, Ojiugo, during the holy Week of Peace despite all warnings of his fellow villagers; this leads to the priest Ezeani's condemnation of this act as "a great evil" irrespective of any provocations (Achebe 30–31). One more incident before the New Yam Festival when the suppressed fear leads Okonkwo not only to beat his wife but also to fire a gun shows how fast suppressed emotions turn into physical danger.

5.8 Ikemefuna's Death and the Failure of Repression

The murder of Ikemefuna is the single most blatant example of the failure of the defense system created by Okonkwo. Although warned by Ezeudu—"That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (Achebe 55)—and with Ikemefuna's last words, "My father, they have killed me!" (Achebe 57), Okonkwo still takes part in the murder. According to Achebe, "He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 57). This action puts appearance above feeling, which can be seen as the farthest point Okonkwo reaches in his defensive masculinity. Repression, however, is impossible to maintain—Okonkwo "did not taste any food for two days," he could not sleep, and realized that "the harder he tried not to think about Ikemefuna, the more he thought about him" (Achebe 61). While his physical collapse—weak legs, "a cold shiver"—brings Okonkwo no peace; rather, he condemns himself: "Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed" (Achebe 62).

5.9 Nwoye's Break and Okonkwo's Final Collapse

The death of Ikemefuna also fractures Nwoye, in whom "something broke" on learning of the death (Achebe 57), a break which later sends him off into Christianity in order to escape the world of his father. The response by Okonkwo, which involves threatening violence and the

statement “How could he have fathered a woman for a son?” (Achebe 149–50), reaffirms the binary which has structured his entire life. The statement to his other sons “I will only have a son who is a man,” and the statement that those who “are tempted to be a woman... should follow Nwoye” (Achebe 169), reveals that Okonkwo’s ability to father still lies entirely in this defensive construct. As disruption caused by the colonizers destroys Umuofia’s warrior tradition, Okonkwo views this as a destruction of collective manhood, stating that his people have become “soft like women” (Achebe 176). The murder of the court messenger is the final, lone statement he makes about his masculinity, but “when Umuofia would not fight on his behalf” (Achebe 190), then his last societal defense breaks down. The final act of suicide (Achebe 192–93) is the completion of that process whereby his life, which is built upon avoiding shame, becomes the ultimate shame through burial “like a dog.”

6. Findings and Discussion

The findings are several and related to one another. First, fear motivates Okonkwo’s character instead of ambitions; his success in farming, wrestling, and battles serves more as the proof gathered by him in order to disprove the accusation of having similar character traits to that of his father. Secondly, not only does Okonkwo reject his father because of laziness, but also because of gentleness itself; thus, an entire emotional spectrum is closed to him. Thirdly, Okonkwo’s masculinity consists of reaction formation, as each feature he develops contrasts sharply to the feature of his father.

Lastly, Okonkwo displaces his unacknowledged fear onto his son, Nwoye, who is made to feel ashamed about his emotional side, because it reminds him of his lazy and irresponsible father Unoka, and in the end, all the beatings and criticisms that come from such displacement drive Nwoye to leave. Sixth, Okonkwo’s repression of any emotional affection that he feels toward Ikemefuna and Ezinma indicates that such suppression does not make Okonkwo stop feeling anything, but only postpones the moment when he would be able to fully express those emotions, as is seen in his extended mourning period following Ikemefuna’s death. In other words, these conclusions point to a way of interpreting Okonkwo’s tragedy as much as psychological as historical one. Colonial intrusion sparks the crisis, but it operates on the subject who is already unbalanced due to his identity constructed purely through denial, as opposed to integration. As Umuofia fails to confront the colonial rule with violence which is so crucial for Okonkwo’s masculinity, the defensive mechanism loses its social support, and its collapse, and not colonialism itself as a force from outside, leads to Okonkwo’s final deed. This approach is not contradictory to the current literature dealing with postcolonial or gender aspects of the novel, but it adds another dimension to the analysis.

7. Conclusion

The article contends that Okonkwo’s tragedy in *Things Fall Apart* should be analyzed in light of the psychoanalytic theory of defensive masculinity. Okonkwo’s fear of resembling his father, Unoka, results in a life-long process of rejection, overcompensation, projection, and repression, which allows him to have high social status while making him increasingly incapable of relating to people, being adaptable, and grieving. In the context of Anna Freud’s theory of ego defense mechanisms, Okonkwo’s aggression, violence, and ultimate suicide should not be seen as manifestations of cultural norms but as symptoms of an identity constructed out of the necessity to avoid shame.

This article enriches the Achebe research through providing a clear and systematic psychoanalytic framework for the phenomenon which existing postcolonial, cultural, and gender approaches to Achebe’s works point to but do not theorize enough. At the same time, the research enriches the studies of masculinity by showing how a masculinity formed out of fear instead of confidence makes it structurally impossible for such identity to accommodate

tenderness, diversity, and changes, thus, making Obierika and Uchendu implicit examples to Okonkwo's identity in the novel itself.

Possible future avenues of research could be to apply this framework to the development of Nwoye and his conversion to Christianity or the resilience shown by women such as Ekwefi, Ezinma, and Chielo, which does not depend on Okonkwo's violent form of resilience. Studies comparing concepts like shame and disruption in colonial settings in other African or postcolonial novels would help test the framework for defensive masculinity constructed here.

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