

The Tragedy of Silence: Emotional Repression and Cultural Breakdown in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: Chinua Achebe is a notable author who has portrayed the powerful consequences of Colonial influence in African literature, which often engages as a powerful voice for memory and resistance. Achebe examines more than only the exterior clash between European colonization and traditional Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart*. He also looks into his characters' silent emotional conflicts. A strict definition of manhood that excludes tenderness and emotional transparency is fostered by Okonkwo's inability to communicate his feelings. His conception of masculinity is significantly shaped by this repression of emotion. Cultural norms and colonial disruption have shaped this emotional silence, which exacerbates personal tragedy and communal disintegration. The analysis, which draws on post-colonial and psychological perspectives, demonstrates how suppressed emotions can serve as a mirror for cultural crisis. Achebe depicts silence as both a quiet resistance and a hidden destructive force. The discussion reveals how personal issues reflect a larger breakdown in identity, tradition, and emotional connection.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, Resistance, External Conflicts, Masculinity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Does a man have feelings? Undoubtedly, he does. However, prevailing traditions often hinder them from openly communicating their feelings. Our culture teaches that real men should display very little emotion. As a result, many men suffer silently, believing that tears are a sign of weakness. As William Pollack notes, "The tragedy of masculinity is that it denies men the permission to express vulnerability, which leads not to strength, but to emotional isolation" (Pollack 25). It is further reinforced by growing up in a culture that makes such broad distinctions about masculinity. This kind of cultural conditioning creates an invisible cage where men can act but not feel. As a result, they hide their emotions, desires, and thoughts. They often lack the courage to express themselves, even when they want to.

These cultural norms significantly shape the world depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The novel is a landmark in African literature and authentically represents African life through an indigenous voice. *Things Fall Apart* is one of the most important works of postcolonial literature. It has drawn considerable academic interest for its exploration

of postcolonial issues and its portrayal of the clash between native traditions and colonial influences. Despite this, the emotional lives of male characters have received little attention in scholarly discussions, which tend to focus either on female experiences or general structural themes. Okonkwo, the main character, is often seen as a symbol of cultural resistance, but he is less frequently portrayed as a man who suffers in silence out of fear of appearing weak. His emotional struggle, shaped by a culture that discourages male vulnerability, raises important questions about the psychological effects of suppressing emotions. As Mpalive-Hangson Msiska observes.

Achebe's portrait of Okonkwo is one of a man crushed by the weight of a hypermasculine ideal, who mistakes emotional suppression for strength and vulnerability for weakness. (Msiska 88).

This paper explores how masculinity can appear as a silent burden and how silence can become psychological suffering. It analyses how *Things Fall Apart* represents masculinity not merely as a social obligation but rather as a

source of profound emotional distress. Elleke Boehmer reinforces this view, stating.

Colonialism imposed a cultural hierarchy that invalidated native traditions and forced new, often alien, identities onto colonized subjects. (Boehmer 25)

The conflict in Achebe's novel affects how men like Okonkwo see themselves and express their feelings, and it goes beyond just political or cultural issues. By showing how pride, fear, and silence create internal emotional struggles, psychological theory helps us better understand the male mind. Together, these views reveal the emotional weight that men carry in a society that discourages showing vulnerability and demands strength. By highlighting the often-overlooked emotional difficulties men face in a changing world, this perspective provides a personal interpretation of Achebe's work. This study suggests that *Things Fall Apart* portrays masculinity as an internal struggle shaped by both colonial and local expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Things Fall Apart is regarded as being among the groundbreaking novels in African literary history. A powerful analysis of the conflict between colonial powers and pre-colonial Igbo society. The cultural dispute amongst indigenous Igbo culture and western colonial rule has been the subject of much literary analysis. Scholars frequently examine the novel as a seminal piece of post-colonial literature, highlighting how it depicts identity, resistance and disruption in culture. As Peter Barry writes, "post-colonial texts frequently explore a sense of cultural loss, of being cut off from a past and unable to access a future" (Barry 199); it is evident in Achebe's portrayal of a changing society.

A number of scholars have examined the role of masculinity in the novel, especially in relation to Okonkwo's character. His deep fear of failure and weakness, inherited from the shame of his father's life, leads him to adopt a strict and often violent form of manhood. Other academics have examined the reasons behind the breakdown of Igbo society.

The psychological and emotional aspects of silence in the narrative are rarely examined by academics. Although Okonkwo's harsh behaviour and lack of vulnerability are frequently brought up, his intense emotional suppression is rarely thoroughly explored. As M. D. Hasinur Siddique observes, "Achebe portrays Okonkwo as someone who devalues everything feminine, leaving him rather unbalanced" (Siddique 1). His deeper feelings are hidden by this rigid, masculine ideal, which turns strength into internal collapse.

Silence appears in a variety of forms throughout the novel, including fear, pride and tradition, but it is frequently portrayed as the main force behind both personal and cultural tragedy. This work draws on previous scholarly discussion but focuses on emotional silence as a powerful and destructive force. This study provides a new perspective on Achebe's work by examining how silence, formed by cultural

expectations and individual anxieties, leads to isolation, misunderstanding and finally, destruction.

III. SILENCE AS A CULTURAL VALUE IN IGBO SOCIETY

In *Things Fall Apart*, silence is a valued trait in Igbo society. It is seen as a sign of maturity, strength and discipline, particularly by men. Public displays of emotion are discouraged and people are expected to control their feelings instead of express them. This quiet is not perceived as empty but instead as a means for maintaining respect, authority and social order. As Kwame Gyekye explains.

In many African societies, silence is not a sign of passivity but a deliberate cultural strategy for conveying strength, maturity, and respect. (Gyekye 114).

From an early age, Okonkwo is taught that expressing emotion is a sign of weakness and is associated with shame and failure. Self-control and dignity are important qualities for the Igbo people. Silence is meant to show respect, especially in the presence of elders. It can also help maintain social order. Additionally, silence creates a gap between personal feelings and public interaction.

According to Okonkwo, his father was a failure. He learned nothing from him. Okonkwo uses silence to show his power and to avoid being like his kind but disappointing father. He suppresses feelings such as fear, despair, and love because he thinks that showing them would make him look weak. As R. W. Connell observes.

Patriarchal societies often teach men to fear vulnerability, equating emotional expression with weakness and failure. (Connell 45).

This line demonstrates the extent to which he takes in the social pressure to repress feelings. Achebe depicts this cultural norm of silence as a trap as well as a tradition. Although it seems to uphold dignity, it also inhibits emotional transparency. Silence becomes more than just a cultural habit for Okonkwo; it deeply isolates him emotionally and moulds his entire identity.

IV. SUPPRESSED AFFECTION: OKONKWO'S EMOTIONAL DISTANCE FROM HIS FAMILY

Okonkwo is a man with deep emotions who has been conditioned to keep them hidden. Growing up in a society that regards emotions as weakness, he believes that expressing affection, particularly as a man, is risky. This belief influences how he treats those closest to him, particularly his children. His bond with his daughter, Ezinma, is a powerful example. She is intelligent, brave and the child he most trusts. Nonetheless, he hides his feelings for her. He is concerned that expressing his feelings will make him appear weak to others. Achebe writes, "Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his daughter's strength. But he would never show it" (*Things Fall Apart* 45). This silent affection is hidden within him, unheard

and unshared. Even when he is deeply concerned about her health, he expresses his feelings through actions rather than words.

Achebe demonstrates in this family moment how emotional quiet, caused by cultural pressure, leads not to strength but to alienation. Okonkwo's struggle to show affection makes him feel alone. The people he loves most turn into strangers.

V. TRAGIC CONSEQUENCES OF REPRESSION: THE DEATH OF IKEMEFUNA AND COLLAPSE OF IDENTITY

A particularly painful aspect of *Things Fall Apart* is the death of Ikemefuna, the boy Okonkwo grows to love as a son. Although he feels a strong bond with him, Okonkwo decides to follow tradition and hide his feelings. The elders warn him not to take part in the act after they decide to have Ikemefuna killed. Still, he insists on delivering the final blow, fearing that showing mercy will make him look weak. A recent study explains that,

Okonkwo's inability to adapt to cultural change and his inflexible masculinity make him unable to survive in a world that is rapidly changing around him. (Sangthanzuala et al. 439).

This shows that his fear of emotions is stronger than his personal relationships. His inner conflict and silence lead to an action that deeply troubles him. This tragedy marks the start of Okonkwo's moral and emotional downfall. He begins to lose touch with those around him, becomes restless, and experiences guilt. The emotional silence he relied on starts to overwhelm him instead of protecting him. As the story progresses, Okonkwo finds it harder to cope with the changes in his village. Traditional structures begin to breakdown as colonial influence grows. Instead of adjusting to these changes or expressing his feelings, he becomes more stubborn and aggressive. In the end, the silence that once made him appear strong leads to his complete isolation.

When Okonkwo learns that the Igbo people are beginning to accept colonial rule and Christianity, he feels devastated. He believes he cannot stop his community from leaving behind their traditions and values. This cultural change deeply troubles him, so he decides to follow customs more strictly.

His profound suffering leads Okonkwo to the final act of taking his own life. His last act of defiance is symbolised by his traditional Igbo warrior attire. Igbo people believe that killing oneself is an abomination and the clan members do not bury such a body. Through this instance, Achebe demonstrates how cultural disturbance exacerbates emotional repression, which ultimately destroys both individual dignity and group identity.

VI. CONCLUSION

Okonkwo's struggle with showing emotions is not just his issue; it reflects how his Culture views emotions as a weakness. In the society depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, men are expected to be strong, quiet, and in control. Hiding feelings is considered a sign of strength, but it often leads to emotional pain instead.

Achebe demonstrates this clearly by showing how Okonkwo becomes increasingly troubled inside. He fears looking weak, so he masks his true feelings. This silence ultimately becomes destructive and contributes to his suicide. His death highlights how harsh cultural expectations can inflict emotional harm and lead to isolation.

Future research can look into how emotional silence continues to impact the lives of other male characters in African literature. By studying how men in various cultural settings are taught to hide their emotions, scholars can better understand how masculinity influences mental health, relationships, and personal decisions.

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