"HOW VIOLENCE MAKES A MAN:

An Analysis of the Relationship between Violence and Masculinity as Portrayed in Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy

by Samuel Carter

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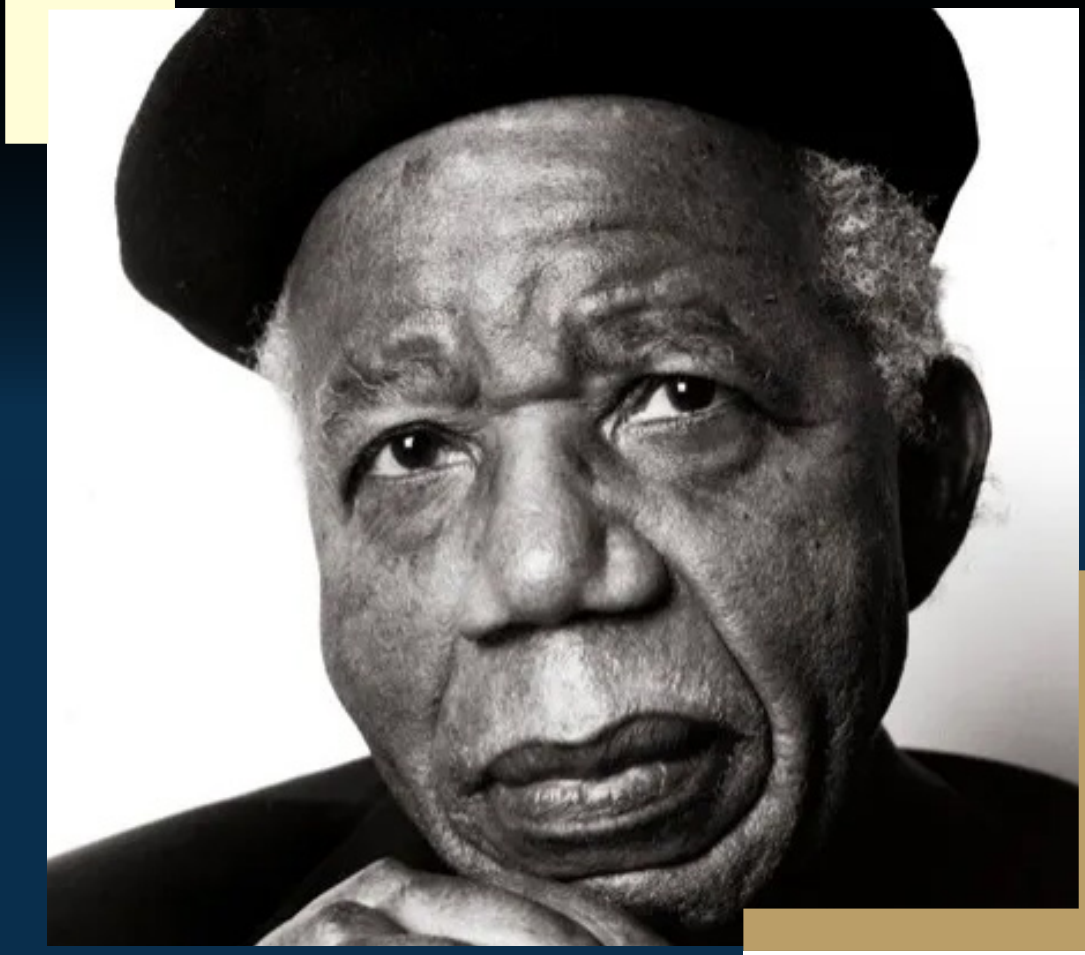
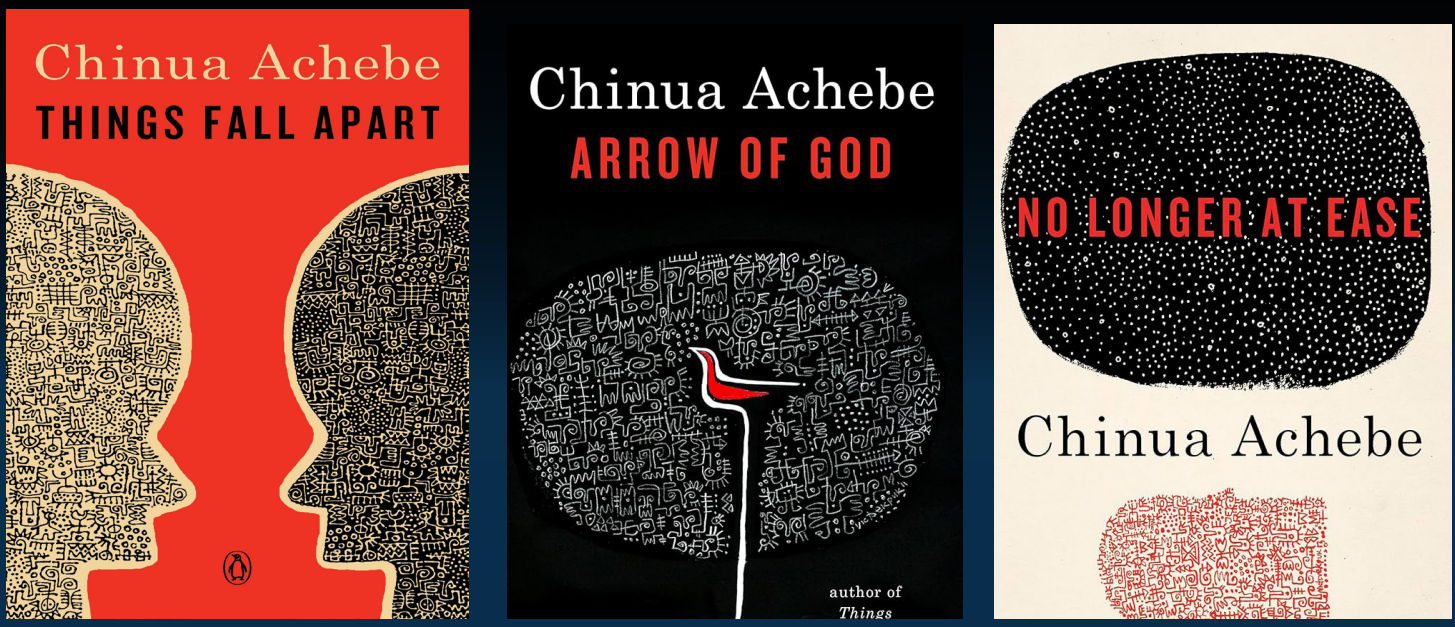


Figure 27: Achebe at home in Annandale-on-Hudson.Photograph by Steve Pyke, 2008.

Introduction

One of the first truths we learn in the human experience is that violence is a foundation of nature. This is not some big secret that lurks behind the corners of walls, it is a truth that stands proudly in the light, waiting for us to look. The relationship between humans and violence is a complicated one, as some are revolted by it and others are elated at its existence and perpetration. One of the most complex facets of the phenomenon is the relationship between violence and identity.

Humans like to relate concepts to create some semblance of understanding of the world and masculinity and violence are a prominent pairing, the hunter that provides for the village or the soldier who bears the scars for his home, but what is the understanding of the relationship between individual perpetrator and communal identity? How does violence make a man? What makes violence a masculine act in the eyes of the social zeitgeist? The colonization of Nigeria and Africa as a whole, led to the ideas around such concepts to change. The injection of Christianity, the legislation that changed the lives of Africans, and the cultural norms that circulated during this period of African History all transformed norms concerning violence and masculinity. To better understand this change in the relationship between violence and masculinity, this article will analyze the African Trilogy by Chinua Achebe, a prolific Nigerian writer whose works are praised to this day. Of course, no one is free from the eye of criticism, so we will be framing his works against criticisms of his writings and the Gender System developed and coined by Maria Lugones.



Figures 28, 29, & 30: : Cover Designs by Susan Yuran for the African Trilogy commissioned by Penguin Press

Baseline in Nigeria

Intimate Partner Violence is a widespread phenomenon and is one of the most common forms of violence committed, with it having a 20 to 71% prevalence rate in official reports, but it is also believed to be higher due to poor reporting systems and societal pressures against reporting.[93] This number rises in situations when the victim is a woman in a vulnerable state, such as impoverished or disabled. 28% of Nigerian women have experienced intimate partnerviolence starting from the age of 15 onward, with rates increasing when teens and adult women become pregnant or contract HIV or AIDS. The most common source of this violence is the male counterparts expressing an identity conflict, as they start to see themselves as less masculine because of the inability to provide for their families and loved ones, which leads to a crisis of identity because the logic is if a man can't provide for his family he is not a man.[94]

In certain regards, the concept of gender in Nigeria resembles that of the western world, echoing the sentiments of those who colonized it. A man's ability to provide for their family, their physical ability, and their proclivity towards violence will dictate how "masculine" they are. Intimate Partner Violence stems from a frustration with masculinity, with men using violence to undermine accusations of "femininity".[95]

The use of violence being a separator for men and women can be seen within the communities of the Central Nigerian city Jos and the

nearby rural area of Plateau State. They have faced a series of conflicts starting in 2001 that have led to the deaths of 7,000 people and even state-sponsored military intervention and have only recently started to reduce in their frequency due to peace programs and initiatives aimed at reducing this conflict.[96] Curiously, a common attitude of mockery towards the men who either didn't participate in the violent conflicts and those who strived to create the peace programs, with the jabs and insults being "reduced" to women. In the eyes of both camps, it was better to have contributed to the conflict and be responsible for 7,000 deaths than to have been a non-participant or actively opposed because peace was the feminine option.

The Lugones Gender System

The theoretical frame created by Maria Lugones, the Modern/Colonial Gender System (MCGS), is an amalgam of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Anibal Quijano's Coloniality of Power. The majority of the MCGS is Quijano's work on the Coloniality of Power but reviewed and in Lugones's own words "complicated" using CRT.[97] The Coloniality of Power recontextualizes how "race" is a fabricated way for specific groups of people, Europeans, to have a level of "natural superiority", Lugones further develops this system to recognize that race is not the only social class created to have a "biological" superiority; gender is also a victim of this colonization of concepts.[98]

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Lugones then divides the MCGS into two aspects, the Light Side and the Dark side. The Light Side is the "surface" level of gender discrimination such as wage gaps, lack of the same freedoms afforded to men, a societal expectation for women to reduce themselves to only being mothers. The Dark Side is the intersection of the colonization of race and gender, where African men were made to be lesser by on the one hand, making them seem feminized or on the other hand, African Women were hypersexualized and exploited for sex. While not great, the Light Side is the "hyper idealized" version of Coloniality, whereas the Dark Side is the intersection where gender is used as a weapon against those of a non-European "race" or heritage.[99]

Chinua Achebe's African Trilogy

In *Things Fall Apart,* the first book in Achebe's African Trilogy, we fol-

low Okonkwo, a revered and well-respected man of the Umuofia village. One of the main parts of his character in the novel is his violent nature as he will beat men he finds lazy, his wives, and even his own children. The other men of his village are also violent, but Achebe repeatedly illustrates that Okonkwo is far more violent than his village can tolerate. Okonkwo's motivation in the novel is to avoid becoming like his father, in both the negatives and the positives, and in such starts to internalize a divide between the masculine and feminine. A man with no titles in his village is referred to using the same word for a woman, and so he treats every man with no titles as a woman and attempts to dominate them. Whether that domination be in the form of social humiliation, such as the one time a man attempts to interject into a village meeting and Okonkwo stated "this is a meeting for men" as a reply. He also sets clear divides between tasks for his children, as when one of his daughters offers to help him carry some of his belongings his response is that's "a boy's job". Okonkwo sees women not as peers but as chores that he needs to beat into submission, to the point that he sees men who "can't control their womenfolk" as not men.

Near the beginning of the novel, a young man named Ikemefuna from different village is taken as a tribute for the death of an Umuofia woman. Ikemefuna spends three years with Okonkwo, becoming part of the family in the meantime and creating a close familial bond. At the end of the three years, he is sentenced to death by an oracle of the village, and Okonkwo is the one to deliver the fatal blow. It is obvious that he is mourning Ikemefuna as he had become like a son, but he feels shame at the guilt for having been part of his death.[100] He sees this emotional turmoil as feminine and therefore shameful, asking himself "When did you become a shivering old woman," and stating that this turmoil over violence has made him a woman. This theme of femininity and peace being shameful to Okonkwo continues throughout the novel.

Initially, Achebe leads the reader to believe that all the Umuofia acted

Figure 31: A map of the Igbo-speaking community within Nigeria and within Africa by NuclearVacuum, 2013.

and believed this way. Later in the novel after Okonkwo has been exiled for committing manslaughter against a kinsman, Okonkwo is confronted by his uncle for his misogyny and sorrow of being forced to live in his motherland. Other elders in the Umuofia clan also place their wives on an equal footing, as one wife wielded a similar level of authority in her home as her husband.

In *Arrow of God*, the second book in the trilogy, we follow Ezeulu, the chief priest of the Ulu for the Umuaro clan, during the early days of the colonization of Nigeria. While the gendering of violence isn't prevalent, the societal view of violence is discussed and as previously established in *Things Fall Apart*, violence is seen as masculine in the Igbo society these novels take place. In the very first chapter there is a sharp contrast to the behavior of Okonkwo in the first novel. Ezeulu's daughter is beaten by her husband and instead of accepting it as "controlling his womenfolk" Ezeulu and his son see it as a grave offense. Consequently, Ezeulu's eldest son goes and beats the abusive husband half to death.[101] In the second chapter of the novel, the main conflict begins to unfold as a nearby village claims a plot of land that was originally given to the Umuaro people to be cultivated. In an effort to negotiate, a messenger party is sent to gage whether the other village is willing to negotiate for that land or is prepared for war. One of the messengers is killed by the rival clan, but half of the Umuaro believe that he had invited death upon himself for destroying a vital piece of the rival clansman's shrine. At a later point in the story, Ezeulu's son overhears a group of men discussing how Ezeulu had killed a python, which is a crime on the same level as killing a kinsman to the Umuaro people. When Ezeulu's son comes home to tell his father what he overheard, Ezeulu's response is that instead of coming home he should have beat the man spreading "lies".[102]

It seems that in this novel, and to the Umuaro people, violence is seen not as a crime but as an end in and of itself in the same way words are. Beating a man to settle abuse, killing a man for offending one's ancestors, and beating a man for telling lies are all seen as somewhat acceptable means of resolution. There is strength in the ability to settle conflict with violence, to beat or bleed understanding into those you are opposed with, and that strength is seen as a masculine feature.

No Longer at Ease follows the grandson of Okonkwo, Obi, as he attempts to balance his new position within the colonial government and the traditional beliefs of his mother and family. Unlike the previous two novels, this one doesn't feature any notable acts of violence, besides an abortion near the end. The opening is a series of scenes that take place after the events of the novel, in which the protagonist's boss talks about how Africans aren't able to

resist the temptation to commit crimes, such as taking bribes. Later in the novel the same boss states, "But in a country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty." He made the word "'educated' taste like vomit." Obi may not perpetrate physical violence as the past novels did, but he does engage with the effects of colonialism directly. Racism and poverty are focal points of his experience. Obi's masculinity does start to become tied to his ability to provide, as he starts to spiral from the expectations of the Igbo, his family, and for his partner Clara. He starts to buy more and more things to maintain a level of materialism, as his wealth becomes tied in part to his masculinity.[103]

Within this trilogy, the reaction to violence also changes, evolving with the progression of colonialism. *In Things Fall Apart*, violence has a ceremonial and legal place within society. When Okonkwo beats his wife, he is only chastised for this when he does so during a week of peace. When he accidentally killed the son of a prominent man, he was exiled, and the rest of his village performed a ceremonial desecration of his property. This is different than the reaction found within *Arrow of God*, as violence is returned in kind. When Ezeulu's daughter is abused by her husband, her family goes and beats him to an inch of his life. When an envoy of Ezeulu's village destroys an idol while in the rival village and is killed for it, the people of Ezeulu's village start killing the other village's people. This starts a war between the villages, which is only stopped by negotiations between the two villages. In *No Longer at Ease*, the violence is not physical, rather it is social and systemic. Obi faces racism from his boss and those around him at his work, and instead of returning that treatment in kind he bears it. Violence was ceremonial, then a tit for tat kind of reaction, and then normalized during the height of colonialism.

Achebe and the MCGS

Achebe provides a perspective in *Things Fall Apart* that emulates the viewpoint of masculinity in modern Nigeria, and slowly throughout the story confronts the idea that femininity is shameful, but it has its purpose in society just like masculinity. We are shown examples of men and women occupying similar places in their households, such as with Ndulue and his wife, whom Ndulue consults for every decision he makes. Okonkwo is confronted by his uncle Uchendu for his blatant hostility towards the feminine and having to live on his motherland during his exile, Uchendu confronts him with a lecture about the importance of the mother in Igbo culture:

> It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme. Is it right that you, Okonkwo, should bring to your mother a heavy face and refuse to be comforted?[104]

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Achebe continues this confrontation of the hegemonic masculinity of Nigeria in *Arrow of God* by directly confronting the domestic violence that

was illustrated in the first novel. Ezeulu's daughter is beaten severely by her husband and instead of treating it like any common occurrence or routine chore as it was in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu's family immediately takes drastic measures to achieve a sense of justice for such disrespect. While his son is the one that commits the act of violence against the husband, Ezeulu is the one to confront the behavior of the neighboring village:

> You should have seen her the day she came home. Is this how you marry women in your place? If it is your way then I say you will not marry my daughter like that." The men agreed that Ibe had stretched his arm too far, and so no one could blame Obika for defending his sister.[105]

Achebe starts the trilogy confronting the idea that the masculine and feminine are two ends of a spectrum and not two independent factors of identity. Achebe confronts this with his first protagonist, whose viewpoint is strikingly similar to the dominant one in Colonial and Post-Colonial Nigeria, where Okonkwo is confronted directly by his uncle and indirectly by the example Ndulue and his wife sharing authority. He also confronts this idea of polarity between the masculine and feminine with *Arrow of God*, in which Ezeulu performs actions that were previously seen as feminine in the earlier books of the trilogy, such as the way he sits when interacting with a shrine. The idea that those who run away from conflict are cowards and therefore feminine is present from not only Okonkwo but also in contemporary Nigeria, but Achebe consistently confronts that notion with wise and powerful men stating the opposite. When confronted over killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo responds that he isn't a coward afraid of blood, to which his friend responds that this is an offense to the earth mother and a transgression upon the land.

While his confrontation of the polarity of masculinity and femininity is laudable, he does write women to be somewhat one dimensional rather than fully developed, agentive characters. Okonkwo's wives are never as deeply analyzed as their male counterparts, with Ikemefuna having more depth than Okonkwo's wives combined. Okonkwo's other children besides Nwoye are ignored in the novel besides his daughter Ezinma, but only for the fact that Okonkwo can wish she was born a boy multiple times in the novel. Ezeulu's daughter is the victim of domestic violence and the catalyst for the dispute between the two families, but the focus quickly shifts from her to her brother and father. In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's conflict comes from his mother and Clara, and while they do receive more depth here than other women in this trilogy, Achebe doesn't first describe Clara's personality but her body and objectifies her in the process.

Reflection

Violence is seen as a tool in the Igbo society, as framed by Achebe's African Trilogy, but had evolved into a form of masculine identification for Nigerians. Instead of a nuanced balance between the masculine and feminine aspects, coloniality slowly turned gender into a two-category polarized system, in which violence is a positive masculine trait and peace is a negative feminine trait.[106] Okonkwo is a character written to have the viewpoints of historic and indirectly contemporary viewpoints towards gender, and throughout his work Achebe works to not only destigmatize femininity within his works, but he also seeks to deconstruct the concept of violence and especially its relation to masculinity. He confronts the colonial ideas of gender with the nuanced and insightful understandings of the Igbo people, and while Violence is seen as a Masculine trait still to this day, Achebe illustrates through his writings the flaws of such a divisive perspective.

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Photograph of Refiloe Letuma, an African healer. https://mg.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/5ae4c319-gogolanga_8898-1068x1140.jpg

A gay pride event held in Cape Town, South Africa https://cdn.aaihs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/shutterstock_1385514719-scaled.jpg

"Fictions of the Past" Christopher Morris

Image of Yonne Vera taken in her garden in Bulawayo, Photo taken by Eric Beauchemin, 2004. Eric Beauchemin, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Front cover of first edition of Butterfly Burning by Yvonne Vera, 1998.

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Achebe at home in Annandale-on-Hudson. Photograph by Steve Pyke, 2008. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/26/after-empire

Cover Designs by Susan Yuran for the African Trilogy commissioned by Penguin Press.

A map of the Igbo-speaking community within Nigeria and within Africa by NuclearVacuum, 2013. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Igbo_Community_in_Nigeria_and_Africa.svg