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### Valorization of Violence in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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#### Abstract

This paper excavates the valorization of violence in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through the anthropological perspective of violence. *Things Fall Apart* explores the pre-colonial Igbo land of Umuofia, Nigeria. The Umuofian culture glorifies the violence very highly and people of Umuofia even legitimize the homicide in the name of masculinity. Their cultural practices encourage not only inter-cultural clash and conflict but intra-cultural violence between and among its members. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, is a respected warrior and clan leader of Umuofia. He frequently exhibits violent acts: he kills a fifteen-year-old boy Ikemefuna to prove his masculinity; at Ezeudu's funeral, Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills Ezeudu's son; he then slaughters a court messenger and finally commits suicide. Furthermore, Okonkwo kills several people in inter-racial wars. He severely beats his wives and children; he often quarrels with neighbors and engages himself in fierce wrestling matches. Umuofians' associate violence with manliness and if a man fails to perform it, he is considered a woman. The present reading thus, attempts to unveil violence and its glorification in the name of culture, masculinity, ritual sacrifice, and other kinds of communally sanctioned violence.

**Keywords:** Violence, culture, masculinity, Umuofia, Igbo, clan, colonizers

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## Introduction

Violence is often defined as the intentional use of power or force against oneself, another person or against a community, which either results in injury, death or social and psychological harm. In its simple sense, violence means injury and violation involving people or property. It inflicts people physically as well as psychologically. Racism, sexism, exploitation, and ethnic or religious persecution are all possible causes of violence. Thus, in the broad sense, violence is the exercise of force or power that inflicts injury or damage.

Violence, power and force are often held to be synonyms; however, they are not; they are distinct and different phenomena. Hannah Arendt in her seminal work, *On Violence* mentions that violence and power are not the same; the most obvious difference between power and violence is that "power always stands in need of numbers, whereas, violence up to a point can manage without them because it relies on implement" (42). She argues that violence is distinct from power, force, or strength, and it; "always needs implements [.....], the revolution of technology, a revolution in tool-making was especially marked in warfare" (4). Arendt throughout her work, attempts to distinguish violence from power, force and strength.

Hitherto history is the history of war and violence. The human history has witnessed genocide and extermination in the name of wars; ethnic or racial cleansing in the name of civil wars and homicide, and sacrifice of humans in the name of rituals and revolutions. Different political ideologues try to justify violence in the name of identity, ideology, and revolution. Friedrich Engels for instance, defines it as the accelerator of economic development. Engels writes: "Wherever the power structure of a country contradicts its economic development, it is political power with its means of violence that will suffer defeat" (qtd. in Arendt, 9). In Marxist terminology, Engels means ultimate control of base structure over superstructure. For, C. Wright Mills, violence is the most flagrant manifestation of power and that "all politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence" (qtd. in Arendt, 35). Mao Tse Tung proclaims: "power grows out of the barrel of a gun (qtd. in Arendt, 11). Similarly, Karl Marx was also aware of the role of violence in human history, but "this role was to him secondary; it is not violence but the contradictions inherent in the old society brought about its end" (Arendt, 11). In spite of, Marx's primary emphasis on the contradiction inherent in the capitalist society, his critics blame him for provoking violence and dismantling social order.

## Methodology

This research paper has used qualitative and interpretative research method. The primary text has been interpreted and analyzed by employing various theories on violence. Different theoreticians and philosophers have shed lights on violence from different perspectives. Rene Girard for instance, associates violence with what he calls "mimetic desire," by the same token; Walter Benjamin defines it in terms of means-ends categories. Karl Marx on the other hand, blames state as the institution of violence, and Frantz Fanon goes further and advocates for counter violence in order to resist the violence perpetuated by colonialism. Thus, this paper aims to explore violence in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* by incorporating various critics and their philosophies. The researcher has collected some books and journal articles as the secondary sources, further theoretical and philosophical insights have been developed from extensive library research.

## Results and Discussion

Violence is outcome of difference and othering. It usually takes place between two different nations, cultures and ethnic or political groups. R.C. Tripathi in *Perspective on Violence and Othering in India*, points out that; identity contestations are the root cause of violence. It according to him, serves an instrumental purpose for people who identify themselves as a members of group against other groups in order to achieve political, economic or social objective. He further opines:

*Identities based on members of groups and communities, ideologies, cultural values and beliefs form the bases of contestations. Contestations may take place not only between people holding different identities but also between multiple identities, for example, between ethnic and national identities that an individual carry. (6)*

However, these arguments on violence have been contradicted by Rene Girard in his philosophical work; *Violence and the Sacred*. For him, difference does not necessarily give rise to violence rather violence is caused by what he calls "mimetic desire". Girard declares: "Mimetism is a source of continual conflict. By making one man's desire into a replica of another man's desire, it invariably leads to rivalry; and rivalry in turn transforms desire into violence"(169). Thus, rivalry for Girard arises, when, the subject and his rival desire for the same object.

Rene Girard's "mimetic desire" has a lot to say to today's world. It shows why do people fight and what they are fighting for. And at the same time, it also explores the ritual role of sacrifice. Girard further mentions that, "at the height of the sacrificial crisis man's desires are focused on one thing only- violence. And, in one way or another

violence is always mingled with desire" (145). Two desires converging on the same object are thus, bound to clash. By a strange consequence of their relationship both the model and his/her disciple are unaware of the inevitable rivalry. Girard further elaborates:

*The model, even when he has openly encouraged imitation, is surprised to find himself engaged in competition. He concludes that the disciple has betrayed his confidence by following in his footsteps. As for the disciple, he feels both rejected and humiliated, judged unworthy by his model of participating in the superior existence the model himself enjoys. (146)*

This leads to open rivalry between the model and the disciple and ends in violence; because of their identical desire violence is inevitable.

Violence is an inevitable part of human civilization and every society in the world is afflicted with it. Violence affects individual lives, social relationships, national issues as well as international affairs. In *Understanding Violence* Ramashray Roy notes: "Violence, both at the individual and collective levels, becomes deep-rooted and pervasive. To extricate man from his continuous sinking into the barbaric slime of cupidity is the avowed goal of all traditional thought"(37). The inevitability of violence is further explored by fifteenth Century Italian thinker Niccolo Machiavelli in *The Prince*. Machiavelli talks of two ways of contesting: the one by law and, the other by force, "the first method is proper to man and the second to beast. But because the first is frequently not sufficient, it becomes necessary to resort to the second" (qtd in Roy, 31). Machiavelli's emphasis on violence reveals that violence is unavoidable and inevitable part of human civilization and time and again, it becomes necessary to maintain peace and order.

Walter Benjamin in his formative essay, *Critique of Violence*, attempts to explore violence in terms of means-ends category. He postulates that violence as a means is judged in terms of a just or an unjust ends. For him, natural law attempts to justify the means, by the justness of the ends where as positive law attempts to guarantee the justness of the ends through the justification of the means. In addition to it, Benjamin opines that, "all violence as a means is either law making or law preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates; it forfeits all validity"(261). Both these kinds of violence for Benjamin are manifested in police power, which is law-making because its characteristic function is not the promulgation of laws, rather the assertion of legal claims for any decree; and law-preserving as it is at the disposal of those ends. Both these forms of legal violence are problematic but necessary. There is no resolution of human conflict without them. Critiquing on the military violence Benjamin further

mentions that "militarism is the compulsory, universal use of violence as a means to the ends of the state" (258). Military violence for him is the use of violence as a means to legal ends for the subordination of citizens to laws. Finally, Benjamin draws distinction between mythical violence and divine violence. He asserts:

*If mythical violence is law making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (268)*

Mythic violence, Benjamin states is the ground of the law and divine violence opposes it in all respect. Mythic violence is bloody power over life for its own sake; whereas, divine violence is pure power over all life forms for the sake of all the living being.

In *Violence*, Slavoj Zizek discusses the ways we perceive or misperceive violence. Violence for Zizek, takes three forms: subjective, objective and systemic. For him, subjective violence is clearly visible violence performed directly by an identifiable agent. "Subjective violence is just the most visible of the three"(1). On the other hand, objective violence has no clear perpetrator and is often overlooked in the background of subjective violence. Objective violence is invisible because the objective violence of global poverty cannot be blamed on any one person or entity. Similarly, systemic violence for Zizek is inherent in the system. It is not only direct physical violence, but also indicates more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relation of exploitation and domination including the threat of violence. Zizek further examines the inherent violence of capitalism, globalization and fundamentalism.

Chinua Achebe explores the valorization of violence and masculinity in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. First published in 1958, the story of the novel chronicles the pre-colonial life of Igbo land in Nigeria and the intrusion of the British colonizers during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel is one of the most extravagant statements on violence, notwithstanding Achebe's ambivalent attitude towards it. On the one hand, Achebe seems to glorify violence in the name of Umuofian culture, and on the other hand, he seems to oppose it in the name of colonial violence. He wants to expose how violence in Umuofia prior to colonial intrusion helps to hold and maintain social order and how colonial violence destroys and destabilizes the social order of Umuofia.

The very beginning of the novel signals the violence and its valorization. The protagonist of the novel, Okonkwo, is a respected warrior and clan leader of Umuofia. As a young man of eighteen; Okonkwo had brought honor to his village by defeating Amalinze the cat in a deadly wrestling match. In fact, Amalinze the cat was the great

warrior who for seven years was unbeaten; "from Umuofia to Mbaino" (1). The audience valorizes the violent wrestling match by beating the drums and singing the flutes. Achebe describes his protagonist Okonkwo in heroic manner, "He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look" (1). Achebe in these lines tries to expose the protagonist and his masculinity. Time and again, Okonkwo performs violent acts, because of which, he is made a clan-leader of Umuofia. He is obsessed with violence and for him violence is power. "He did pounce on people quite often [...] whenever he was angry and couldn't get his words but quickly enough, he would use his fists" (1). Okonkwo is haunted by the actions of his cowardly father Unoka, who was "in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (2). In the novel there is societal privileging of manly, warrior – like qualities which lead to the marginalization of the weak and meek such as Unoka and Nwoye, who are labeled as impotent men.

The role of violence in the novel is not often the primary focus of critical response; however, David Hoegberg in his journal article, "Principle and Practice: The Logic of Cultural Violence in Achebe's Things Fall Apart," contends that the novel is "One of the most influential fictional statements on violence in a colonial setting" (1). In his treatment of the novel, Hoegberg focuses on the representation of cultural or communally sanctioned violence. "The cultural violence" for Hoegberg does not refer only to violence between people of different culture. But, it also refers to violence that is encouraged by the traditional belief system and rituals of a given culture and practiced upon its own members. The cultural violence used in this sense, would include ritual sacrifice, punishment for crimes, and other kinds of communally sanctioned violence. Okonkwo's killing of the innocent boy, Ikemefuna is a part of ritual sacrifice, and thus, it is sanctioned.

Okonkwo's obsession of masculinity and violence gets released when he kills a fifteen-year-old boy Ikemefuna. He kills Ikemefuna in order to prove his masculinity. Not only Okonkwo but other villagers of the clan take part in Ikemefuna's killing. Along with Okonkwo, the entire Igbo community is obsessed with violence. It shows how Umuofian culture legitimizes homicide in the name of values and ideals. Achebe narrates: "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak"(19).Ezeudu, the oldest man of the clan warns Okonkwo not to participate in the boy's execution, since Ikemefuna calls Okonkwo father but to avoid seeming weak and unmanly, Okonkwo disregards the warning from Ezeuda and kills his son – like boy Ikemefuna.

Okonkwo's violent outburst leads him to commit another murder. During the Ezeudu's funeral, Okonkwo's gun accidentally explodes and kills Ezeudu's son. Since

killing a clansman is a crime against God, Okonkwo must exile himself and his family for seven years. Achebe states, "Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened" (41). Earlier Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna was sanctioned by his community because Ikemefuna was from another clan. But this time, he has to pay a penalty by expelling himself from his village for seven years. If he had not killed his clansman, his violent act would have been glorified in the name of masculinity. In Umuofia's latest war, "he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head [and] he drank his palm-wine from his first human head" (3). Here, Achebe seems to suggest how Umuofians celebrate violence and masculinity and how they enjoy violent inter-tribal clash and conflict. Killing men means having manliness and if a man fails to perform it, then he is considered as "efulefu," a worthless man or woman.

Okonkwo's obsession with the masculinity and violence is further revealed by the following lines, "Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land-masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (17). Okonkwo recognizes that his son Nwoye is coward like his father Unoka. Okonkwo thinks that Nwoye along with his other children; should be brought up on masculine stories of violence and bloodshed in order to grow into a perfect man, Frank Salamone in his article, "The Depiction of Masculinity in Classic Nigerian Literature" mentions that Okonkwo wants to distinguish himself from his coward father who lacks valor and manliness. Consequently, Okonkwo; "wishes to be a warrior, a strong man in the traditional Igbo value system" (143). The Umuofian society highly appreciates masculinity and bravery; and Unoka lacks such virtues; neither, he is a strong and hardworking man. Thus, he is condemned in the traditional Igbo society. In order to get rid of his father's unsuccessful legacy, Okonkwo works endlessly, tilling his fields and sowing the seeds. He embraces traditional norms and values of Igbo community, appreciating the violent culture of his society and accepting the significance of grappling.

Masculinity for Okonkwo means controlling people with force especially, one's wives and children. He thinks: "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children, he was not really a man" (17). Okonkwo has learnt to treat his wives and children violently from his community. So, he frequently beats them. Once Ojiugo, the youngest wife of Okonkwo, forgets to prepare meal for him; thus, "he beat her very heavily. In his anger, he had forgotten that it was the week of peace"(9). He violates the rules of earth goddess Ani by violently beating his wife. He does not seem to care whether it is a "week of peace" or "week of war," his only concern is manifestation of manliness by violent means.

Umuofian's love for war and weapons invites culture of violence in their community. It is not only Okonkwo, but, most of the clan members have armed themselves with the powerful weapons like guns and machetes. They have not learnt the art of compromise and the art of peaceful settlement of debates. It is this love for weapon which alienates Okonkwo from his village. He goes to his motherland Mbanta for seven years, where his maternal uncle Uchendu helps him to settle. In Mbanta also Okonkwo works very hard in the field to prove his manliness. In the very short span of time, he has established himself as a hardworking courageous man. Even though he is disappointed at his misfortune, he reconciles himself immediately in Mbanta. Achebe reveals Okonkwo's longing for weapons: "They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and machetes" (45). Okonkwo's longing for guns and weapons displays his passion for violence.

During the second year of Okonkwo's exile, his friend Obierika brings the bad news that Abame, another village has been destroyed by the white men. Later on, he realizes that the British colonizers are living in Umuofia with the intent of introducing Christianity. The white men also establish their government there. White Christians' intrusion in the Igbo-land establishes colonialism in Umuofia and its surrounding villages. Igbo people have mixed reaction regarding colonialism: some of them follow conversion into Christianity and support British colonialism; but others oppose it. Moreover, Okonkwo plans to resist colonialism violently. He says: "If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No. I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does" (52). Okonkwo advocates for violent resistance against colonialism and he feels that his masculinity has been challenged by the British colonizers. In his influential analysis of colonial domination and resistance to colonialism, Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, asserts that nonviolent resistance is futile to the structural and physical violence of colonialism. Fanon states that "the process of decolonization is necessarily violent" (qtd in Jefferess, 2). Furthermore, Achebe's portrayal of the British slaughter of the Abame in retribution for the murder of a colonial agent and Okonkwo's consequent calls for militant resistance, reveal the circle of hate and revenge that Fanon acknowledges in which terror is met with counter-terror and violence with counter-violence.

After seven-years of banishment, Okonkwo returns to Umuofia; he finds that his village has been changed by the presence of British colonizers. Moreover, the colonial government arrests Okonkwo and other elder members of the clan, in accusation of demolishing the local church. The white ruler further humiliates and insults Okonkwo and other clan leaders. After, his release, Okonkwo counsels his countrymen to resist the British colonizers militantly. He is obsessed with seeking revenge against the colonizers



who have divided and destabilized Umuofia and its traditional culture. But at the same time, he is worried, because the clan members have lost their fighting spirit. Okonkwo recollects the glorious past: "Worthy men are no more [...] we killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours [...] those were days when men were men" (65). Okonkwo's nostalgia for masculine Umuofian culture exhibits the traditional values and ideals of his community. Frank Salamone in his essay, "The Depiction of Masculinity in Classic Nigerian Literature," argues that Chinua Achebe's novel uses "the opposition of masculinity and femininity to encapsulate the conflict between the British and Igbo, between the mission and traditional religion" (141). He further argues that masculinity has become a metaphor for resistance to such colonial violence.

Umuofians finally gather themselves in order to resist the colonial government. Okonkwo, a warrior by nature, advocates war against the white colonizers. He detests any form of cowardice and inspires his people for the violent means in order to defend Umuofian custom and tradition. When court messengers of the British government try to halt the meeting, "Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uninformed body" (67). He beheads a messenger; however, he notices that his people allow the other messengers to escape. He realizes that other Umuofians are not going to defend their values and ideals. He finds himself alone and eventually commits suicide. Andrew Foley in his journal article, "Okonkwo's Fate and the World View of *Things Fall Apart*," blames the British government for the downfall of Okonkwo and his community. He posits that "if the British had not come to Umuofia, the clan would not have fallen apart, and Okonkwo would not have been led to commit suicide" (4). Whereas, Harold Bloom in his critical interpretation of *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart* blames Okonkwo and his aggression for his suicide. Bloom postulates that "if the British colonial regime had not driven Okonkwo to self-slaughter, then his own people would have done the job" (2). Whatever might be the cause of Okonkwo's downfall; the novel celebrates violence and masculinity in the name of Umuofian culture.

### Conclusion

Violence is pervasive theme in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Set in colonial-era of Nigeria, the novel depicts the clash between traditional Igbo culture and encroaching influences of British colonialism. Violence permeates the narrative on multiple levels; from individual conflicts to larger social upheavals. The protagonist Okonkwo, embodies this violence in his rigid adherence to masculinity and his propensity for aggression. His actions often result in physical confrontations. Okonkwo constantly tortures and terrorizes powerless people of Igbo land; when he encounters more powerful people, he kills himself. Because he could not inflict pain to others, he decides to inflict his own body by committing suicide. Achebe juxtaposes cultural

violence with the extreme violence of colonialism. He seems to support cultural violence in the name of Umuofian values and ideals. And, he seems to oppose colonial violence because it has violated the violent culture of Umuofia by using violent means. The widespread violence in the novel is the product of traditional Umuofian culture and its clash and conflict with the colonial Christian culture.

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