

# Social Institutions and the Creation of Masculinities in the African Novel

James E. Onyeashie  
*Augustine University*  
*Ilara – Epe*  
*Lagos*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper “**Social Institutions and the Creation of Masculinities in the African Novel**” explores the influence of social institutions on the creation of masculinities in selected novels. The novels examined here are Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl* and *Second Class Citizen*. The work is anchored on Gender Criticism; specifically, on Masculinities. The paper argues that apart from norms and values, social institutions are very important in the creation of Masculinities. The paper reveals that Family, Marriage, Religious, Economic, Sports, and Educational Institutions create masculinities. The work recommends that there is a need for a paradigm shift in widely held view that in social construction of Masculinities, only norms and values play a major role. As stated earlier, social institutions have been established as being very important in the creation of Masculinities as depicted in the novels examined here.

**Key word:** Masculinity, Masculinities

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## I. Introduction

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### Conceptualization of Major Terms: Masculinity, Masculinities: Normative and Trait Masculinities

As M.H. Abrams has stated, a field of scholarship known as “Men’s Studies” was established early in the 1980s on the model of the pre-existing field of “Women’s Studies” (113). Masculinity is an aspect of Men’s Studies and Abrams further explains that “masculinity” and “masculinities” are used interchangeably and he has defined the concept as “a variety of male roles” (113). Abram’s definition appears not to embrace traits, and this definition does not help a great deal in the clarification of the concept of masculinities. Joycelyn A Hollander has studied masculinity as “traits” (477). This definition is contrary to that provided by Abram. Herb Goldberg affirms that masculinities refer to “masculine responsibilities” (86 – 97) ‘masculine responsibilities’ is not very different from Abram’s definition and so does not help very much with an understanding of the meaning of masculinities. With the idea of multiple masculinities, the study of Men and masculinities has gone beyond a mere itemization of sex roles to the actual or concrete creation and application of masculinities.

Another group of scholars perceive masculinities as masculine strategy for female subjection in patriarchal environments. Susan Arndt posits that “structures, norms, and values of Igbo society are patriarchally informed.” (25) Chimdi Maduagwu states that “earlier scholarship in Africa has associated Gender Studies with Feminism.” (12) This research argues that gender study is also inclusive of the other sex – the male sex. However, it is encouraging to note that gender scholars in Africa as well as in other parts of the world have begun to demonstrate interest in Men and Masculinities Studies which is still within the broad spectrum of gender studies. This research happens to fall into the aspect of gender studies known in broad terms as Men and Masculinities Study.

According to Whitehead, as masculinities studies developed, so too did the concept of “multiple masculinities” (56), that is, the idea that men respond to and embrace masculinity in a variety of ways. In addition, the expression of masculinity can change, according to time, event, and the perspectives of a group or community. Whitehead explains further that multiple masculinities are “commonly segregated into the following categories: hegemonic masculinity, complicit masculinity, and subordinated/marginalized masculinity” (18). Biological, sociological, and psychological approaches to the study of Masculinities have today been classified into two large subfields. These, according to Tom Matthews are: “Normative Masculinity and Trait Masculinity.” (98)

### **Normative Masculinity**

According to Julia T. Wood, Normative Masculinity means masculine norms which are “the recognized or accepted ways of behaving in society” (22). In other words, normative masculinity could refer to wide-ranging issues like statuses and performance in roles attached to them. Performance in roles attached to statuses can place male characters in already existing hierarchies of masculinities which are the hegemonic and the subordinated. Statuses could be formed in social institutions. The specific statuses examined in this paper include husband, father, provider, and leader. The theoretical foundation of normative masculinity is found in Constructivism. In the novels selected for examination here, these positions are undoubtedly portrayed. For instance, in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, the narrator states that Okonkwo is married to “... three wives ... eight children” (TFA, 10). This suggests that Okonkwo is a husband and a father. Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl* “District Officers” (12) are portrayed suggesting the depiction of such statuses. The performance of male characters cannot be at par with one another therefore, the performances will place them in already existing hierarchies of masculinities.

Norms, continues Wood, include “conventions and myriad modes of behaviour men have evolved and continue to evolve with which to go about the business of social living” (23). They vary, of course, from society to society and from time to time. There are degrees of compulsion and degrees of conformity. Masculine norms, asserts James A. Doyle, represent “the living character of males in a group or community, operative in conscious or unconscious control over the male members” (79). Masculine norms compel behaviour and forbid it. They are at once the expression and the limitation of the male group life, an omnipresent influence towards conformity. They are forever molding and forever restraining the tendency of every individual male (80).

According to Whitehead, “masculine norms determine much of masculine subjects’ individual behaviour” (45). For instance Okonkwo in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is married to three wives, not because there is any exhibited philandering trait in him but because polygyny is an accepted norm which earns cultural prestige for polygynists in Umuofia. Therefore, norms are the compelling and forbidding apparatus of the social world that constantly exerts pressure on every male member. They also identify the male individual with male groups. If, on the one hand, masculine norms exert pressure upon the individual male to conform to the ways of his community or social class or sex, the individual, on the other hand, gains identification with his fellows by conforming (51). He thus maintains those social bonds that are clearly essential for satisfactory living. Finally, masculine norms are in the last resort the guardians of male solidarity (56). However, masculine norms and masculine consciousness are generally products of gender awareness.

### **Trait Masculinity**

Trait masculinity refers to the subfield in masculinity concerned with essential attributes of masculine subjects. In other words, trait masculinity refers to male traits like high sexual energy, rationality, emotional unresponsiveness, perseverance, courage, and self-reliance. According to Benjamin B. Lahey, Trait Masculinity refers to “masculine interests and attitudes” (403). Attitudes, continues Lahey, are:

subtle, complex, and changeable modes of consciousness. They are constantly being modified by training, reflection, health, circumstances of every sort. When an attitude is attributed to a person, its character could be judged only by certain external signs – looks, gestures, words. These signs “suggest bravery, cowardice, anxiety, etc. However, in so naming the attitude, a judgment is being passed that the attitude-factor being so named is dominant or at least recognizable in the masculine subject. (405)

Therefore, since attitudes are so complex, so blended, so variant, so individualized that any classification must be, as Stevens Simpson states, “artificial”, no classification can be complete. In the views of Ruth Anshem “Social relationships always involve both attitudes and the interests to which they are related; complete definitions of social relationships must include both attitudes and interests” (41 - 42). The narrator explicates this point in *The Slave Girl* regarding Okolie who “was not very industrious and he hated going to the farm” (11).

Psychologists have over time tried to understand human behaviour through their study of the psyche or the mind which they have done under the title personality. For instance, Sigmund Freud has studied the psyche through the unconscious, preconscious, and the unconscious model. He changed this model when it was criticized by other scholars and in 1920 he replaced it with the id, ego, and superego model. The id and the ego are essentially concerned with traits. When Freud’s student, Carl Gustav Jung approached the same study of human behaviour, he labeled it the collective unconscious.

Examples of traits are courage, rationality, sexual energy, self-reliance, laziness, lying. Many of these traits can be identified in many of the male characters portrayed in the novels studied. Unoka, Okonkwo’s diffident father, is portrayed as possessing the socially rejected trait of laziness. As a consequence of this trait, his performance as a father suffers subordination. In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl* portrays how a male character, Lawyer Nweze enjoys hegemonic respect as a result of brilliance exhibited in the pursuit of formal

education. When he qualifies as a lawyer, his town's folk resident in Lagos see his achievement as theirs and are happy to celebrate him as an icon. These characters enjoy hegemonic or subordinated respect as a consequence of their impressive exhibition of socially endorsed traits. The high display of such traits and performance in roles attached to statuses, usually lead to very high respect or hegemonic status. Conversely a poor or low display of socially endorsed traits and poor performance in statuses usually leads to subordinated masculinity or disdain.

Literature available to us reveals that trait theorists are more interested in describing traits than explaining their origins. Today, Lahey affirms many trait theories have been well articulated and recognized but the best known among them are "Classic theories of Gordon Allport and Raymond B Cattell, and the contemporary Five-factor trait theory" (464).

The general views have been that masculinities are biological, psychological, and social-cultural constructs. However, there is an aspect of the critical debates on the social-cultural perspectives in the study of masculinities that appears not to have been exhaustively examined and this is the influence of social institutions on the creation of masculinities in the novel. The focus of this paper is a literary analysis of masculinities with particular focus on the influence of social institutions in the construction of masculinities, as stated earlier, as portrayed in the selected novels.

### **Social Institutions and the Creation of Masculinities in the African Novel**

The Family is arguably a very important source of Masculinities in many African novels. For instance, virtually all societies/settings in some of the novels of Chinua Achebe and Buchi Emecheta fatherhood is portrayed as ideals guiding childrearing. Some of these masculine normative ideals for fatherhood include being supportive, setting of guidelines, providing moral guide, being a role model, being patient, tries to live the way he wants his children to live, being a good listener, remembers what it was like to be a child and honours his children's feelings. Some characters have undoubtedly earned their exalted position in the socially defined hierarchy of masculinities in fatherhood with particular focus on childrearing.

Jacob in *The Slave Girl* embraces monogamy because of his Christian faith. The modern society does not frown deeply at polygyny but the large size of families associated with polygynous marriages appears to create pressure on polygynous husbands in terms of care giving. In spite of such pressure, multiple wives still remain a source of respect for the husband.

Francis in *Second Class Citizen* can afford to abandon his children in England. This could not have happened in the traditional societies portrayed in Achebe's novels because in those societies, masculine norms also make for family cohesion and unity. In England, the masculine norms guiding fatherhood confuse Francis. After the birth of their fourth child, Adah is out of employment. According to the narrator "hunger drove Francis to work as a clerical officer in the Post Office" (177). However, he finds it difficult to reconcile a situation in which a wife contributes nothing towards the family provision leaving this role for the husband alone. So, there was a conflict going on in his head. What was the point of marrying an educated woman? Why had his parents been asked to pay a big price if all she was going to do was to come to England and start modeling her life on that of English women, not wanting to work, just sitting there doing nothing but washing the babies' nappies? To him he was being cheated. He had to work, study in the evenings and on Saturdays whilst Adah sat there doing nothing. (179-180)

Francis' expectation is understandable given his African background whereby women contributed greatly towards providing the necessities of life for their families. However, Francis is caught in the web of social change and his relocation from Africa to England also suggests that he has to accept the European ideal of fatherhood, but his understanding of the dynamics of change is distorted and his family cohesion suffers. The ego war between Francis and his wife on a foreign soil comes to a head with a divorce (191).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo begins his childrearing strategy very early in the lives of his sons as dictated by the Umuofia society. According to the narrator,

Inwardly, Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early... Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. He would stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him. (TFA, 24)

When Okonkwo becomes worried with early signs of laziness he observes in his first son, the narrator quotes Okonkwo, exclaiming in frustration, "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan" (TFA, 24). Nwoye's attitude of laziness and conversion to Christianity creates in Okonkwo a feeling of failure in childrearing. However, by the end of his seven years exile and after Nwoye's conversion to Christianity, he does not give up on the remaining five sons rather, he addresses them:

You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people... (122).

From Okonkwo's approach to childrearing, it is possible to believe that male characters see the success or failure of their children as their own. With Nwoye's, embrace of Christianity, it appears that Okonkwo has failed in childrearing but he does not allow this failure to spread to his other sons. Nonetheless he knows that Nwoye's conversion can be interpreted as a betrayal of normative masculinity of Umuofia, therefore, a dent on his status as a lord of the clan. To avoid more embarrassment, he begins to encourage in his sons the development of the desired ego ideals to be men whose masculine performances will be hegemonic. Okonkwo's performance in child rearing therefore is an effort to construct a self-image as a hegemonic father.

### **Masculine Norms of a Leader**

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Mr. Brown; a European missionary performs hegemonically as a religious leader in Umuofia. He is "very firm in restraining his flock from provoking the wrath of the clan" (126). An example of his hegemonic control over his flock is the case of Enoch, the son of the priest of the snake cult. When Mr. Brown hears a story that Enoch has killed and eaten the sacred python, he does not mince words in establishing his hegemony as the religious leader, he "preached against such excess of zeal" (126).

Mr. Brown's religious authority surprisingly, endears him to those he dominates. Consequently, he makes friends with "the great men of the clan" (126). Later, he is presented "with a carved elephant tusk, which was a sign of dignity" (126). Another example is the District Commissioner's hegemonic performance in political leadership and this is found in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* again, when the church building is destroyed by all the *Egwugwu* of Umuofia in revenge for Enoch's sacrilegious act of unmasking an *Egwugwu* (141). Normally, their action would be hailed by all and sundry, but in this case, authority is no longer in the hands of the leaders of Umuofia but vested in the colonial Administration. Therefore, the District Commissioner, who heads the colonial administration, orders the arrest of the *Egwugwu* to establish his political hegemony in Umuofia.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is a lord of the clan in Umuofia. The narrator explains that as a young man of eighteen,

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements." Twenty years later, his "fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan (*TFA*, 3).

The narrator lists Okonkwo's achievements which qualify him as a lord of the clan

He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and shown incredible prowess in two intertribal wars... Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered... Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders (*TFA*, 6).

### **Masculine Norms of a Provider**

Okonkwo, who, having realized that there is no barn to inherit from his slothful father, Unoka, rejects marginalisation rather, he accepts sharecropping as a means of becoming a hierarch and hegemon in the hierarchy of great farmers. He faces failure shaped by the draught of that year with great guts and in the end, his accomplishment as a great cultivator grants him a place in the hegemonic masculine social hierarchy of farmers in Umuofia. An old man expresses surprise at Okonkwo's meteoric rise to fame thus: "Looking at a king's mouth ... one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast" (19). Okonkwo's quest to be a great farmer and provider for his family makes his ego ideal the same as the normative ideals of Umuofia and this also grants him status as a lord in Umuofia. This finding agrees with the views of Chinyere Nwahunanya that in Umuofia, "Only men of substance may represent their lineages or clans at the larger assembly. And this means that people have to strive to achieve such status" (238). Another male character who has earned social prestige as a consequence of his performance in the provider role is Ogbuefi Nwakibie who "has nine wives and thirty children" (*TFA*, 13). He is repected as a provider that it is very easy for a young man like Okonkwo to approach him with a proposal for sharecropping.

Ogbuefi Nwakibie in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is married to nine wives, which is even a mark of honour for him. Marriage with multiple partners is called polygamy. Polygamy can take either of two forms: The most common form of polygamy is polygyny. The second form is polyandry which is a form of marriage outside the scope of this study. In polygyny, a man may marry more than one woman at a time.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the *egwugwu* or "the most secret cult in the town" (71) is assigned the task of conflict resolution. The *egwugwu* would always hold their deliberations in the village *ilo* usually before a group of elders and a large crowd of ordinary folks. The narrator explains during a trial:

It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men. There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe like outsiders. The titled men and elders sat on their stools waiting for the trials to begin. In front of them was a row of stools on which nobody sat. There were nine of them (70). The case brought to trial appears too trivial to the crowd and an elder asks: “‘I don’t know why such a trifle should come before the *egwugwu*,’ said one elder to another.” (75) The reply to this question encapsulates the great weight of the authority of the *egwugwu*: “‘Don’t you know what kind of man Uzowulu is? He will not listen to any other decision,’ replied the other.” (75) The traditional political institution creating the *egwugwu* by implication has created hegemonic masculinity because the cult members enjoy great control over even very stubborn members of the community.

## II. Findings and Conclusion

The production of masculinities becomes clear if the hierarchy created as a result of norms governing the institutions also create hierarchies which must be filled by different masculine subjects. The operatives cannot earn the same income as those in the managerial/leadership cadre. In this case, the managerial/leadership level becomes a desirable ideal and those occupying this level automatically are placed in the hegemonic hierarchy of masculinities leaving the operatives at the subordinate hierarchy. Therefore, the view of masculinities from the perspective of sexual politics is hardly sustainable because as institutions create masculinities, masculinities also grow into hierarchies in social institutions.

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