Sean Tellvik

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Dr. Ryan Topper

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Cold, Impotent Ash: The Self-Destructive Fire of Masculinity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Masculinity manifests itself in different ways depending on cultural context. The works *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, and *Disgrace*, by J.M. Coetzee, both explore masculinity in its extremes. The male protagonists of these novels, Okonkwo and David Lurie, exist in wildly different contexts: Okonkwo is experiencing firsthand the oppresive colonization of his Igbo clan while David is coming out of apartheid as a white male who benefitted from the history of oppression in South Africa. However, both are driven by passions tied to masculinity, both face harsh consequences as a result, and both are pressured by their respective societies to kill off who they once were. Through their protagonists in *Things Fall Apart* and *Disgrace*, Achebe and Coetzee offer critiques of unbalanced masculine identities—the aggressive, prideful Okonkwo and the entitled, egotistical David—by relaying how such qualities are self-destructive to a man's personal relationships and power roles when unwilling to adapt to social change.

From the beginning of the novel, Achebe primes the reader to track Okonkwo's development through the lens of his masculinity. He identifies that the rift between him and his father, Unoka, is caused by Unoka's effeminate qualities and states, "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved" (Achebe 10). Okonkwo has built a legacy that contradicts his father's reputation through his wrestling, his yams, his wives, his

titles, and his strength as a warrior, all of which are used to boost a man's reputation in the Igbo clan Achebe depicts. Scholar Rhonda Cobham has identified that Achebe selectively misportrays the balance of power between Igbo men and women at this time (517 - 520), relying on this exaggerated imbalance to minimize the women's roles and highlight Okonkwo's journey as a man. Achebe's misrepresentation emphasizes the fact that he is trying to unpack the complex issues surrounding masculine identities. Okonkwo embodies all the values of a man in this society, which is not inherently harmful, but is taken too far when he defends his reputation with harshness and rashness because "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (Achebe 10). This fear often manifests in overly aggressive reactions which result in the destruction and damage of important relationships.

Okonkwo fails as a father to his surrogate son, Ikemefuna, in trying to distance himself from Unoka's qualities, thereby severing his involvement with the next generation. In depicting Ikemefuna's death, Achebe writes, "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 38). By inserting such direct authorial commentary in an otherwise action-based modernist realism, Achebe draws more attention to the link between Okonkwo's masculinity and his rash acts of violence. Achebe scholar Katunga Joseph Minga identifies the way Ikemefuna's "character [is] sharpened by his knowledge and intelligence in multi-tasks," which Okonkwo feels he must destroy to eliminate association with this "underside of female principle" (122). Despite his hints of fondness for Ikemefuna, Okonkwo still strikes him down; not only that, he does so against the village elder's wishes and he does so reflexively. This reveals how ingrained it has become in Okonkwo to defend his

reputation of strength and, therefore, his place among the men of Umuofia to become the manly antithesis to his father.

Ultimately, the brutality of Ikemefuna's killing symbolically loses Okonkwo *two* sons, as it marks the beginning of Nwoye's deeper distrust of his father's hypermasculine values. Okonkwo has always wanted Nwoye to be like him—a man defined by hard work, strength, and success—and threatens to "stamp out the disquieting signs of laziness which he thought he already saw in him" (Achebe 21). Ironically, it is the extreme of masculinity itself which cuts the first major tie between father and son. The feeling of some "snapping of a tightened bow" inside of Nwoye after Ikemefuna's death (Achebe 38) reflects his disillusionment with the warrior-like inclinations of his clan, and he abandons the pursuit of the male values Okonkwo has pushed him toward. Okonkwo's aggression costs him the biggest chance of carrying down his legacy; thus, Achebe outlines how masculinity can destroy itself when taken to extremes. Nwoye turns toward the missionaries because they offer validation of an alternative masculinity, one that allows for the gentleness and idleness Okonkwo sought to stamp out. Achebe offers an internal look at Okonkwo processing the reasons behind disowning Nwoye: he identifies that "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (Achebe 89). In other words, Okonkwo snuffed out his own legacy by overemphasizing all the traits he believes make him a man.

In his final conflict with the colonization force in Umuofia, Okonkwo has the chance to prove that a man like him is still necessary to his clan but fails to justify his aggression and ultimately loses what little he has left. Once again, Okonkwo will not stand to be seen as weak and, in beheading one of the messengers, falls back on the old warrior ways that once defined his clan. As scholar Tobalase Adegbite O. puts it, "This moment in the novel portrays his character

flaws of masculinity and rashness combined with violence and anger, uncontrollable fire" (83). Okonkwo quickly realizes his clan will no longer support his aggressive nature, which now appears brutal, no longer noble, as it once did. The goal of the missionaries has been to convert the native Igbo people, a psychological form of warfare rather than a physical one. In using this strategy, the clan has more difficulty recognizing the colonization force as enemies in the black-and-white lens through which Okonkwo wants to think of them. This is why "he knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because he had let the other messengers escape. [The village] had broken into tumult instead of action" (Achebe 116). Okonkwo may have been able to survive the village's worst crop year in living memory by fighting against his weakness, but the threat of colonization cannot be shaken off, and Okonkwo is at an impasse. Adegbite asserts that "Okonkwo is of the opinion that traditional men have lost their place in society and cannot be termed 'worthy' anymore as Western culture has softened their resolve" (82). Without getting on the colonizers' level by adopting some of the qualities he sees as "effeminate," Okonkwo is unable to rally his people and finds himself redundant under the new power structure.

Achebe uses Okonkwo's suicide not only to highlight that the old ways are dead but to represent how the inability to find value outside of unbalanced masculine qualities is ultimately counterproductive. Minga comments on the failure of Okonkwo's violence in stating that "masculinity in traditional Africa had never been defined by one thing, it had more to do with a complexity of characteristics than with violence as its sole signifier" (122). This is further supported by Uchendu's lessons about femininity, through which he attempts to help Okonkwo unlearn his binary thinking (Minga 122). However, one of Okonkwo's masculine traits is his stubbornness, which is why he turns to suicide as a form of expression, one last condemnation of

Umuofia's changing values without a commitment to personally adapt. The irony is that he has lost his sons, his clan, and his life in pursuit of the type of strong, male identity his clan is turning its back on. Through Okonkwo's development, Achebe argues that an individual cannot produce a sustainable legacy through single-minded masculinity.

While many literary scholars have analyzed Okonkwo's masculinity, few, if any, have placed it side by side in discourse with that of David Lurie, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace.* David follows a complex development similar to Okonkwo involving a comparable level of self-imposed loss but suggests more character change in the end. At the beginning of *Disgrace*, David is at a pinnacle of selfish desire, abusing his power as a professor to exploit his student, Melanie Isaacs, with no regard or reflection about her rights and sufferings. Coetzee implies David's attitude best during the professor's own lecture on Lucifer, when he says, "'He does what he feels like. He doesn't care if it's good or bad… He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses are dark to him'" (Coetzee 33). David does not have to face consequences for his impulses until the hearing, thus fueling a male sense of entitlement to pursue his lust through any means he deems fit, perpetuating his predatory behaviors.

The scene of David's disciplinary hearing reveals the severity of his inflated ego, as there is no room for sympathy, understanding, or decency toward Melanie's sufferings. Coetzee scholar Lucy Graham asserts that "the predicaments of Lucy and Melanie point to a context where victims are compelled to be silent, and thus collude with perpetrators" (442); in this case, David asserts power as a predatory male by silencing Melanie's voice in the proceedings, simply because he finds the whole matter inconsequential. Coetzee operates with more subtlety than Achebe, shortening the gap between narration and David's thoughts to heighten the reader's

sensitivity to the various ill-conceived, self-serving notions that fuel David's passion. Carine M. Mardorossian describes this experience: "Readers are thus brought into an uncomfortable proximity to and complicity with the white masculinist subject's way of thinking" (78). For example, examine the objectifying comments he makes to Melanie: "...a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.'...She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself" (Coetzee 16). Coetzee presents this as an obviously biased way of thinking that only serves David's interests as a man in the same way Achebe inserts authorial commentary on how Okonkwo's actions are tied to his fear of weakness. By bringing the reader so close to David's own justification, Coetzee provokes reactions in the reader that allow them to recognize a moral discrepancy and view this thinking as a fatal flaw.

In the hearing, when this manifests as David blaming Eros for his sexual manipulation of Melanie (52), it only puts his position further in jeopardy. His female colleague, Farodia Rassool, intervenes in the male-to-male dialogue between David and Hakim to assert, "'...all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part'" (Coetzee 53). David's passion is unbalanced by restraint and self-reflection. His male colleagues' sympathy towards his case reveals the history related to male professors taking advantage of students, specifically white male professors and black students. As scholar Marius Crous brings up, "Whereas academics could probably have got away with harassment in the past, now it is no longer possible and David Lurie signifies the new male, the one who is supposed to accept responsibility for his sexual misconduct" (27). David uses familiar male excuses that lead

to him losing his job. The difference in his perception of Melanie's rape versus that of his daughter's, as Graham acknowledges, is that "Lurie has a history of desiring 'exotic' women, and assumes that he has the right to purchase or possess their bodies without being responsible for them or respecting the lives they live" (437). All these tensions come together in this initial stage of self-destruction, through which Coetzee suggests South Africa is no longer a place for white men to exploit their power unchecked. Yet this is just the formal stage of self-destruction, as there is much more of the novel left after these events, where Coetzee goes beyond Achebe to show the possible trajectory of a man who has a life left to live after burning up his reputation.

With David having his male ego challenged in the hearing, Coetzee lays the groundwork for him to gradually take more responsibility for his actions. After the attack on the farm and in the fallout of his daughter Lucy's rape specifically, Coetzee begins deepening David's meditations to go beyond simply his desires toward an understanding of others' experiences and emotions. Mardorossian identifies that "*Disgrace* focuses not on the attack so much as on the response to it" (73), and David's response suggests a breakdown of his old masculine flaws and a potential for growth. Take the following moment of inner dialogue, for instance: "His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough" (Coetzee 72). The first step in redemption is recognition of the problem. The rest is a matter of practice, which he does increasingly more as the novel continues.

For example, when explaining to Bev Shaw what happened with Melanie, David admits, "I was the troublemaker in that case. I caused the young woman in question at least as much trouble as she caused me" (Coetzee 147). Although he does not recognize the severity of what he

put Melanie through or the fact that she did not cause him trouble so much as he brought it unto himself, this is the first time he takes any level of responsibility for his predatory acts. Just as he is unable to see the connection between saying "sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives" (Coetzee 123) and thinking women do not own themselves, David is blinded by his objectification of women and his role in perpetuating it. Yet he feels a newfound sympathy for the sheep, leaving hope that he may eventually feel sympathy toward women like Melanie. Coetzee implies that David must destroy his masculine principles in order to become a more caring individual.

Beyond that, David seeks understanding of other characters' perspectives, be it challenging their decisions or more ambiguously looking for answers. In a perverse way, he does so when thinking about Lucy's rape: "...he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (Coetzee 160). Here, David recognizes his limited perspective as a male and is closer to admitting how one-sided his viewpoint is. He even shows repentance to women in the form of his victim's family, Ms. Isaacs and Desiree, when, "with careful ceremony, he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor...He meets the mother's eyes, then the daughter's, and again the current leaps, the current of desire" (Coetzee 173). Although Crous draws on Diala to assert that this act is "futile because whilst undertaking this gesture, David is 'aflame with lust for [Melanie's sister]'" (36), David's humility in another key scene suggests his sincerity with the Isaacs. When David and Bev Shaw strike up their affair, Coetzee writes, "Of their congress [David] can at least say that he does his duty. Without passion but without distaste either. So that in the end Bev Shaw can feel pleased with herself" (150). While the affair still

benefits him, David is holding a woman's desires above his own. He also uses a condom this time, as Graham points out (443), suggesting he is more aware of consequences now. The bar is set fairly low for David to improve, but various events reveal that he is now seeking to understand and serve women in his own way, and he reaches a sense of humility and understanding in the wreckage of male exploitation.

By the end of the novel, David is able to recognize that his poets have led him astray and admit a sort of defeat in his life. Romantic poets like his hero Byron are somewhat of a role model in his life, representing the tradition of entitled, unsympathetic men that David is a part of. He concludes, "So much for the poets, so much for the dead masters. Who have not, he must say, guided him well" (Coetzee 179), revealing clarity and self-recognition that male Romanticized views of women are self-destructive. Finally, he is giving up what gave him purpose and relief at the beginning of the novel to make way for qualities that will benefit others around him. Coetzee's narrator ponders how David "lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindliness, patience. But perhaps those virtues will come as other virtues go: the virtue of passion, for instance" (218), a hopeful sentiment for such a deeply-flawed man. Georgie Horell states that "the place of the white man in this space, as implied within Coetzee's text, is one of shamed redundancy" (4), which has finally sunk in for David by the end of the novel. At the very least, he is resigned to recede into the background of South Africa and let his flame flicker out more peacefully.

David undergoes a more nuanced form of self-destruction than Okonkwo, but both result from the unyielding pursuit of masculine traits. Unlike Achebe's cynical narrative, which depicts Okonkwo's inner fire burning hot and untamed until it can no longer sustain itself, Coetzee

extends the frame of David’s story to show him rekindling himself after being burnt up by his passions. He makes a new life out of impotent ash whereas Okonkwo “chooses a disgraceful death over a disgraceful life” (Aden 62 - 63), not willing to reconcile his masculinity with more productive qualities like patience. David kills himself, too, symbolically, by killing off the exploitative male professor from the beginning of *Disgrace*. Like a phoenix, he survives this death to live a new life in which he commits less harm, living out his days as “...a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself” (Coetzee 212). Okonkwo, in contrast, is a candle that has blown itself out, leaving behind his clansmen rather than guiding them toward peaceful mediation. Neither author is completely unrealistic in their depictions of both conclusions. Part of the reason David has the privilege to grow is because he is not being oppressed the way Okonkwo is under colonization. Achebe and Coetzee develop their protagonists in far different ways because they write within conflicting contexts, but both authors reach a similar conclusion: unbalanced masculinity is not sustainable without giving way to new ideals.

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