

Hegemonic and Non-Hegemonic Masculinities in *Things Fall Apart* and *Pow!*

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Abstract

This paper analyses and compares the two main types of masculinities presented in the novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe and *Pow!* (2003) by Mo Yan. Both novels offer male characters who display variations of dominant and subordinate masculine behaviour: Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* and Lao Lan from *Pow!* represent hegemonic masculinity, while Unoka from *Things Fall Apart* and Luo Tong from *Pow!* represent subordinated masculinities or even male femininities. Using Raewyn Connell's theory of gender order and her concept of multiple masculinities, this paper offers a comparative analysis investigating the construction of the stereotypically masculine characters of Okonkwo and Lao Lan with the feminised masculinities of Unoka and Luo Tong, respectively. While both novels distinguish between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, where non-hegemonic masculinity is coded as feminine, neither form of masculinity is prioritised or considered successful in either novel, as both hypermasculinity and hypomasculinity are portrayed as being harmful.

Keywords

hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, subordinated masculinity, male femininity, fragile masculinity, stereotypical masculinity, feminised masculinity

Introduction

Representations of masculinity in literary studies has been researched less in comparison to representations of femininity, despite the fact that critically exploring masculinity can provide valuable insights into gender and power dynamics within societies. Where gender studies initially adopted binary frameworks and methodologies that treated masculinity as being embodied solely by men and femininity solely by women, an idea prevalent in research before the 1990s (Parker and Parker)¹, Raewyn Connell's gender order theory and concept of multiple masculinities provide an alternative framework, tailored for a nuanced exploration of the complexities of gender. Connell posits that there are multiple types of masculinity, thereby challenging and limiting forms of binary gender categorisation (76-81). Similarly, her premise that men can also embody femininities complicates the view of gender as dichotomous (76-81). Another branch of criticism in gender studies, introduced by Judith Butler and further developed by critics such as Jack Halberstam, Mimi Schippers, and Carrie Paechter, postulates the notion of gender performativity, arguing that masculinities and femininities are gendered behaviours that can be enacted and embodied by people of any sex. Drawing from Connell's theory and Schippers's concept of male femininities,² this paper explores the portrayals of the two major types of masculinities presented in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Mo Yan's *Pow!* (2003). Focusing on the protagonists Okonkwo and Unoka from *Things Fall Apart* and Lao Lan and Luo Tong from *Pow!*, this paper examines the relationship between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities in both novels. Paying attention to the four male characters' masculinities, it argues that subordinated masculinities are constructed as femininities in the texts to protect the idealised masculinities (often assertive and somewhat aggressive) and the patriarchy in the protagonists' respective cultures from contamination, resulting in fragile masculinity.

I begin my paper with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks underpinning my analysis, including Connell's concept of multiple masculinities (77-79) and Schippers' concept of male femininities (96). Before I analyse the novels, I focus on the conceptualization of gender and, specifically, masculinity in the contexts of pre-colonial, colonial, and

¹ Parker and Parker (1979) provide multiple examples of studies that have applied a biological reductionist approach to studies of masculinity and femininity. Steven Goldberg's works such as *Why Men Rule: A Theory of Male Dominance* (1993) and *Male Dominance: The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (1973) are examples of the prevalence of this idea on gender research from the 1970s to the 1990s.

² See "Defining Masculinity" for a discussion of the types of multiple masculinities and 'male femininities'.

post-colonial Igbo culture in Nigeria and dynastic and communist China respectively. The section “Defining Masculinity” traces gender roles and the idealised masculinities of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria as well as a brief history of the changing concept of idealised masculinity in China. The first sub-section of my analysis focusses on Okonkwo and Unoka from *Things Fall Apart*, paying special attention to their individual expressions of gender and their relationship with each other; the second sub-section does the same for Lao Lan and Luo Tong from *Pow!*, showing how their masculinities are affected by their rivalry with each other. Drawing from these discussions, the third sub-section of my analysis engages in a comparative analysis of the portrayal of masculinities in both novels, demonstrating how Okonkwo and Lao Lan share many similarities in how they enact their masculinities as they both embody a hegemonic masculinity while Unoka and Luo Tong embody subordinate masculinities.

Hegemonic and Non-Hegemonic Masculinities

Raewyn Connell’s gender order theory and concept of multiple masculinities redefines masculinity, suggesting that “masculinity” represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves [in relation to other men] through discursive practices” (Connell and Messerschmidt 841). Most importantly, the theory offers a framework to explore the social dynamics relationships between various types of masculinities (Connell 76-81). Taking an intersectional approach, Connell emphasises how gender is shaped by social structures (e.g., patriarchy/matriarchy and religion), suggesting that the relationships between various types of masculinity are affected by factors ranging from socio-economic class to colonialism, among others (Connell 76-81).

In her theory, Connell identifies four main types of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalised. The most dominant form of masculinity is termed hegemonic masculinity (77-78). This is the “currently accepted [...] configuration of gender practice” in a given culture that keeps men in power while subordinating women and other marginalised groups (e.g., LGBTQ+ people, People of Colour) (Connell 77). As a result of hegemonic masculinity’s connection with the subordination and oppression of other groups, it is often perceived as being wholly negative and reduced to traits such as violence and aggression (Connell and Messerschmidt 840-841). However, this is not entirely accurate as some practices associated with hegemonic masculinity are considered positive as well, such as financially supporting a family and being a caring father (Connell and Messerschmidt 840-841). The second type, complicit masculinity, is embodied in “[m]en who [receive] the benefits of patriarchy without enacting a strong version of

masculine dominance” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). While these men respect the women in their lives, do not engage in violence against women, and share household chores, they still “can easily convince themselves that feminists must be bra-burning extremists” (Connell 79-80). Essentially, these men find patriarchy to be advantageous to them and passively uphold this system while still supporting the women close to them. The third and fourth types, subordinated and marginalised masculinities, respectively, are perceived as being the most inferior masculinities (Connell 79-80). Both subordinated and marginalised masculinities include men of minority groups based on sexual and racial or ethnic identity (Connell 78-79, 80-81). Subordinated masculinities are generally perceived as unmasculine and even feminine (Connell 78-79). An example of this is the construction of homosexuality as feminisation in many cultures, which leads to a subordination of homosexual men (or men perceived as such) to preserve the power, dominance, and therefore the superiority of hegemonic masculinity over all other masculinities (Connell 78-79). Moreover, any person presenting as male, who is perceived as not embodying or displaying hegemonic traits of masculinity, can be labelled as representing a form of subordinated masculinity and is stigmatised for gender non-conformance. Of these four types of masculinities, only hegemonic and subordinated masculinities appear in this paper because, as I will argue, these are the masculinities that are exhibited by the male characters in the novels that I discuss in this paper.

Hegemonic masculinity, despite its social dominance, is conventionally embodied only by a minority of privileged men in a given culture. Often, it is prominently represented by a cultural ideal like a media figure (e.g., Clint Eastwood) or a fictional character (e.g., Batman) (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). This is because hegemonic masculinity is a normative construction and therefore works more like an aspirational ideal for men than an actual identity. This ideal of hegemonic masculinity, however, has very real effects for those who present as male/present masculine because it requires all men (and arguably also all masculine individuals) to “position themselves in relation to it” (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Given that “[h]egemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole” (Connell 78), most masculinities are automatically subordinated when one type of masculinity is elevated as the ideal. In most cases, masculinities that do not conform to normative masculine looks or behaviour are categorised as unmasculine, a categorisation that often draws parallel with femininity. The implication is that these effeminate or feminised men, along with women, are inferior to men who are idolised as ‘real’ men (Connell 76-81).

This is where the concept of male femininities becomes relevant to the analysis. Building on Jack Halberstam and James W.

Messerschmidt's research on female masculinity, Mimi Schippers (2007) proposes an approach to defining and understanding male femininities. She maintains that society "limit[s] male femininities to the characteristics and practices that are culturally ascribed to women, do the cultural work of situating the feminine in a complementary, hierarchical relationship with the masculine, and are embodied by men" (96). This is accurate in patriarchal societies where distinctions are made between 'real' men (i.e., men embodying hegemonic masculinity) and feminine men (i.e., men embodying non-hegemonic masculinities) (Schippers 96). These distinctions serve a specific purpose: since men who embody feminine characteristics and engage in feminine behaviours threaten the binary model of masculinity and femininity on which the gender hierarchy privileging hegemonic masculinity depends, these men are stigmatised and punished for their non-conformance in order to preserve the status of hegemonic masculinity and, thereby, patriarchy (Schippers 96). Importantly, as the two novels analysed here show, similar ideals of hegemonic masculinity can take root in very different cultural contexts.

Defining Igbo Masculinity

Concepts of gender vary greatly in Nigeria as it is an ethnically and religiously diverse country. While there are significant cultural differences across communities, the form of masculinity that has been idealised by many groups in both pre- and postcolonial Nigeria is characterised by physical strength (E. Uchendu 291). The idealised form of femininity, in contrast, underwent drastic transfigurations when the country transitioned from the pre- to the post-colonial era (Johnson-Odim 79-83, Chuku 81-103). The most prominent change in expressions of gender in post-colonial Nigeria was the adoption of Western understandings of gender where masculinity was directly placed above femininity in the gender hierarchy (Johnson-Odim, Chuku). This was in direct opposition to the more complex ways in which tribal communities viewed gender, where women were not restricted to a few limited roles in society, but were instead empowered to hold important roles in their clans (Johnson-Odim, Chuku).

The ideas of gender and gender hierarchy in Igbo culture differs from that in Western culture, which means that Western concepts of femininity and masculinity do not necessarily apply (Nzegwu 564). Igbo culture values combining the strengths of both men and women, which is why both genders play important roles in ensuring the success of their clans in terms of supporting the economy, in upholding their spiritual practices and maintaining harmony. Therefore, women are not relegated to the home but play key roles in spiritual practices and contribute in significant ways to the economy through agriculture (Oluwagbemi-Jacob and

Uduma). Contrary to Western ideas regarding African tribal organization, women as a group are neither powerless nor (completely) submissive in Igbo culture, as demonstrated by the high number of Igbo women who have held the highest titles in their clans (Oluwagbemi-Jacob and Uduma 226). Igbo culture in the pre-colonial era defined masculinity primarily by strength. Idealised/hegemonic masculinity included physical attributes such as “the possession of well-developed muscles, superior physical strength, and above average height” and the willingness and ability to enact physical violence and exhibit aggressive behaviour were considered true signs of masculinity (E. Uchendu 291). Moreover, socio-political skills such as the ability to lead and exercise control were also highly valued (E. Uchendu 291). Men were expected to wield control in the domestic, public, and political spheres and were overall in charge of controlling the subordinated social groups, comprising children, women, and men of lower social status (E. Uchendu 291). Essentially, male dominance was a sign of true masculinity (Carroll 41, Njoku 24, Johnson 100), and any man who did not embody these traits was perceived as deficient, weak, and therefore not worthy of esteem (V. Uchendu 40).

From the late 1940s to the late 1960s, anti-colonial nationalist activism grew exponentially throughout Nigeria (Newell 52). After Nigeria became a republic, hegemonic Black masculinity shifted to a more individualistic and consumerist form (Epprecht 4). Although some traditional notions of masculinity were preserved, such as men fulfilling the role of the breadwinner, during the nationalistic era of the 1950s, the shift to industrialization in urban areas in Nigeria led to the mimicry of the European gender binary norm, thus the power women held in pre-colonial Nigeria was drastically reduced (Lindsay 440).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe skilfully depicts Igbo masculinity before and during British colonisation. By situating the novel within a village in Igboland, Achebe provides insight into the construction of masculinity among the Igbo people, and through the British invasion of Umuofia, Achebe demonstrates how traditional Nigerian social structures were disrupted, gradually leading to cultural genocide. In doing so, the novel highlights the damaging effects of hegemonic masculinity displayed by Okonkwo and the stigmatisation of men like Unoka for embodying subordinated masculinities.

Masculinities in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is described as a very successful man who was “well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” and whose “fame rested on solid personal achievements” (Achebe 3). Okonkwo conformed to his tribe’s ideals of hegemonic masculinity, possessing an imposing physique, athleticism, and displaying aggression,

and he was a well-respected figure in his community (Achebe 3-4, 8). In the end, however, it was his stubbornness and extreme aggression, which are markers of toxic hegemonic masculinity, that led to his tragic descent from a community leader to killing himself, an act seen as one of the greatest sins in his tribe (Achebe 116-117, 194, 196-197).

Right at the outset, Okonkwo reveals his complicated relationship with his deceased father, Unoka, introducing the reader to the differences between them and the values of their tribe Umofia (Achebe 4-7, 13). The differences between father and son are both behavioural and physical, signalling the different types of masculinities they embody. While Okonkwo is depicted as “tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look” (Achebe 3) and as embodying hegemonic masculinity, Unoka’s subordinated masculinity is suggested by his “tall but very thin” (Achebe 4) appearance, the unmasculine nature of his body symbolized through “a slight stoop” (4), and his facial expression, his vices, and his artistic inclinations deemed by the community as idleness: “He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing his flute” (Achebe 4). Okonkwo’s narration delves into Unoka’s many failures and claims Unoka was “lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow” (4). According to Okonkwo, Unoka believed in enjoying life when he was wealthy and in suffering when he was not: “He always said that whenever he saw a dead man’s mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one’s lifetime” (Achebe 4). He was less interested in conforming to gender norms and more interested in enjoying his life, and therefore failed at many of his responsibilities as the patriarch of the household, such as being successful at farming and taking care of his family: “[Unoka] was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat” (Achebe 5). He had never accrued any titles that men in Umofia aimed to achieve (Achebe 7). Instead of being interested in traditionally masculine pursuits such as sports, war, and yam cultivation, his son suggests, he only cared about music, which was not a hegemonic masculine practice (Achebe 4). Consequently, he was considered by Okonkwo and many villagers as “a failure” (Achebe 5).

Unoka was considered less than a man by many around him because he was unable to conform to Umofia’s masculinity ideals and, thus, categorised as a man embodying a subordinated form of masculinity. This is exemplified by an incident in Okonkwo’s childhood, when one of his friends called Unoka “agbala” (Achebe 13). While “agbala” is a synonym for woman in Igbo, it also referred to men “who had taken no title” (Achebe 13), implying that Unoka was seen as weak and a failure. The use of “agbala” to refer to Unoka indicates that the failure to embody hegemonic masculinity meant that he was deemed womanly or feminine

in a context where femininity was equated with weakness. Essentially, Unoka is depicted in this account as a womanly man, an embodiment of male femininity. While he was afforded some respect by the Umofia by virtue of being a biological male, his failures at embodying ideals of masculinity suggest led to his denigration as feminine according to Umofia gender norms. The associations drawn between Unoka and womanhood or femininity in the text demonstrate this. One potential interpretation of the incident just described is that Unoka's failure to embody Umofia's concept of hegemonic masculinity made him a threat to their concept of masculinity. Thus, by conceptualising Unoka as being a womanly man, his community was able to protect their idealized concept of masculinity and patriarchal ideals by suggesting that Unoka was masculine by sex but feminine in every other way.

Since the incident during which his friend insulted his father by calling him "agbala," Okonkwo has become determined to be nothing like Unoka: "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved" (Achebe 13). Unoka's failures deeply affect Okonkwo; he spends his life attempting to rebuild the family's reputation that Unoka destroyed. This single-minded determination to avoid his father's fate drives many, if not all his decisions: "his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. [...] It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe 13). As a result, Okonkwo makes concerted attempts to be the opposite of his father, successfully becoming "one of the greatest men of his time" (Achebe 8). Paradoxically, the novel suggests, Unoka's failures at conforming to ideals of hegemonic masculinity resulted in Okonkwo's fragile masculinity. Okonkwo then sought to overcome this fragility by enacting hegemonic masculinity through expressions of violence as a coping mechanism to protect his reputation as a masculine man (Achebe 12-13).

Okonkwo's efforts to overcome Unoka's failures and prove his own hegemonic masculinity to others and himself result in him becoming "one of the lords of the clan" (Achebe 123). However, his position is annihilated when he accidentally kills someone and is exiled from his clan for seven years as a punishment (Achebe 116-117). Through these events, Okonkwo's fragile masculinity are attacked in two ways: firstly, the crime he has committed is coded as a female one as it was "inadvertent" (Achebe 117), and secondly, it is coded female because he sought refuge with his deceased mother's family (Achebe 121). Seeking aid from his mother's tribe enhances his shame and the circumstances of his exile make him feel emasculated. This emasculation fuels his efforts to prove his hegemonic masculinity to others and himself upon his return to Umofia (Achebe 163, 172). Contrary to his expectations, however, Okonkwo

returns to a different landscape where Christian missionaries have entered Umofia and divided the clan (Achebe 172-173). His desire to make up for his lost years results in aggression that he directs at the British colonists and Umofia's leaders, with whom he disagrees. Much of his anger is directed at Umofia's men as he perceives their lack of violence against the missionaries as a failure of masculinity: "he mourned for the warlike men of Umofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women." (Achebe 173). Despite his desire to engage in violence against the missionaries (Achebe 182), he is overruled by his community and subsequently subjected to an emasculating experience by the Christians: Okonkwo is imprisoned and treated in a demeaning way which is all the more disrespectful as he is a leader in his village (Achebe 184-185). This emasculation further angers Okonkwo and reignites a desire to reinforce his hegemonic masculinity.

The missionaries' challenge to his hegemonic masculinity is further complicated by the intersection of his identity as a village elder and as a man whose village is undergoing colonisation. Okonkwo is not only disrespected by men who are lower on the social hierarchy than he is, according to the social customs of his tribe, he is also considered less important and therefore less masculine due to European perceptions of Nigerian tribal culture as primitive and inherently inferior. The ultimate result of this emasculation, his final response, is his act of murder (Achebe 194) which eventually leads to his own suicide (Achebe 196). Although suicide is deemed to be an unforgivable sin in his tribe (Achebe 196-197), Okonkwo refuses to be further emasculated by the missionaries (whom he considered his inferiors) to such an extent that, in response, suicide becomes the only way to escape and maintain some measure of power and control over his fate. It is tragically through his suicide, then, that he somewhat assuages his fragile masculinity.

Ironically, Okonkwo faces an inglorious end similar to that of his father. Suicide is against Umofia's customs as it is "an offence against the Earth," making Okonkwo's body "evil" and untouchable by his clansmen (Achebe 196). In comparison, Unoka had fallen ill with swellings on his body, symptoms considered "an abomination to the earth goddess," which is why he was taken to the Evil Forest and left to die (Achebe 18). Both men have violated their clan's customs, and therefore neither can be given a dignified burial as befitting a man in Umofia. Despite Okonkwo's numerous attempts to embody hegemonic masculinity as a direct response to Unoka's male femininity, Okonkwo fails to overcome his fragile masculinity and to succeed socially in Umofia, just as much as Unoka is unable to fulfil Umofia's ideals of masculinity. This indicates that neither toxic hegemonic masculinity nor subordinated masculinity/male femininity ultimately succeed in fulfilling the clan's requirements and

expectations of men, demonstrating how masculinity at either extreme end of the masculinity spectrum can fail in similar ways. Furthermore, this narrative signals that the Igbo construction of masculinity, as depicted by Achebe, is damaging to men, as it pits them against each other and passes on this concept across generations, thereby perpetuating harm. This transmission of harm is evident in Unoka's family, not only because Okonkwo's embodiment of hegemonic masculinity is a result of his aversion to his father's subordinated masculinity. Okonkwo's son Nwoye, the novel suggests, in turn embodies a subordinated masculinity due to his aversion to Okonkwo's hegemonic masculinity (Achebe 49, 58, 144); ironically, then, in each subsequent generation, the son's hatred of his father is replicated, demonstrating that the rigid concept of masculinity causes intergenerational trauma.

Defining Chinese Masculinity

Due to China's cultural diversity, concepts of gender are not uniform throughout the country. As with the Igbo culture, gender dynamics in China also differ from Western concepts. Although Chinese women have consistently been ranking lower than men in the gender hierarchy, nonetheless, women's roles have been fluctuating throughout the country's history (Keightley 53-54). Because various dynasties defined gender roles differently, ranging from women being restricted to limited roles such as wife and mother to allowing women to participate in social events and business (Ebrey 10-106, 177-193, Zurndorfer 1-18), women were able to achieve some economic success in Chinese society despite the overarching belief that women were inferior to men in many ways (Zurndorfer 1-18). Similarly, the concept of masculinity in China has changed over time, as different dynasties employed different definitions of masculinity. For example, the Tang (618-907), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1636-1912) valued physical strength and a muscular appearance in men (Gulik 6). This changed, however, following the Manchu occupation (1931-1932), when martial arts were adopted by the Manchu people. In response, the Chinese elite began to perceive athleticism as vulgar and changed their definition of hegemonic masculinity to being sensitive and delicate (Gulik 7).

The Chinese ideal of masculinity throughout the ages can be best described with the Confucian concept of "wen-wu," which loosely translates to "cultural attainment-martial valour" (Kam 4), with "wen" referring to intellectual pursuits such as proficiency in the arts and "wu" referring to physical aspects such as brute strength and combat skills. Unlike most dominant Western concepts of masculinity, idealized Chinese masculinity regards both physical strength and intellectual pursuits as desirable. In Chinese masculinity, four main male types can be identified:

the physically strong heroes “yingxiong (outstanding male) and haohan (good fellow)” and the intellectual men “the caizi (the talented scholar) and the wenren (the cultured man)” (Kam 8). While intelligence generally holds more value than physical strength, this has been subject to change. Whether it was ‘wen’ or ‘wu’ that was more valued at a particular historical moment depended upon various factors, so that physical strength, for example, was prioritised during warfare (McMullen 18). While there have sometimes been tension between the two types, and while the ‘wen’ aspect was considered superior in early philosophical thought, a balance between the two was considered the ideal masculinity throughout much of China’s history (McMullen 75).

In 1980s Communist China, the concept of masculinity shifted to prioritise the “wu” aspect. As a consequence, attributes such as physical strength and brute force were prioritised over intellectuality and male dominance was rampant in rural China following the Communist Revolution (Mann 1613). This cultural, social, and political revolution “empowered violent young men” in villages who were made “the primary beneficiaries of revolutionary change” (Mann 1613). According to Susan Mann, “male culture had not always dominated rural China” but “[t]his ‘macho-military’ culture dominated by young males has in recent years reached from the countryside into the cities” (1613).

Masculinities in *Pow!*

It is against the backdrop of this new hegemonic Chinese masculinity, which normalised violence, that Mo situates his novel *Pow!*. Despite containing absurd scenes, such as when a group of ostriches wreak havoc at the Carnivore Festival resulting in many people slipping on the birds’ faeces, the novel also seriously depicts the turbulent Communist period of China’s history, during which citizens were struggling to survive the transition to an open-market economy. The central setting and characters of the novel, Slaughterhouse Village and its meat-obsessed inhabitants, represent China’s shift to the “wu” concept of masculinity, which values traits of hegemonic masculinity such as aggression and financial success. In fact, the novel can be interpreted as depicting a struggle between the “wen” and “wu” concepts of masculinity, embodied by the characters Luo Tong and Lao Lan, respectively. Although not father and son, Lao Lan and Luo Tong, like the characters of *Things Fall Apart*, have a complicated relationship. While they start out as acquaintances, they become rivals when they both attempt to win Wild Mule’s affection (Mo 38). By becoming Wild Mule’s sexual partner, Luo Tong is able to assert dominance over Lao Lan. However, upon Luo Tong’s return to Slaughterhouse Village years later, their power dynamic

has shifted. At this point, it is Lao Lan who is in a position of power, forcing Luo Tong into a role of subservience.

Lao Lan is represented as a ruthless man who “accumulated blood money, putting a knife in white and taking it out red” (Mo 27). He makes astute observations about the economy, and morally questionable but financially rewarding business decisions such as pumping meat with water and formaldehyde to ensure its longevity, becoming so successful that he can open a profitable meat-packing plant (Mo 8, 195). Through his assertion of dominance and penchant for violence, Lao Lan outwardly embodies the “wu” aspect and hegemonic masculinity. Described as “an impressive specimen of a man” (Mo 19), he is viewed by most characters in the novel as an effective leader who helped the village to become prosperous during a challenging time in China’s history (Mo 193). However, plagued by what must be viewed as his fragile masculinity, he is obsessed with proving his dominance and masculinity to others as well as himself. Exemplified by the aforementioned incident at the Carnivore Festival, where he threatens to kill ostriches and fire employees because he is unable to control the fleeing ostriches (Mo 132), Lao Lan cannot tolerate any threat to his masculinity, suggesting that he embodies a toxic form of hegemonic masculinity.

In contrast to Lao Lan, Luo Tong is an intelligent man who is not obsessed with hoarding wealth but instead focussed on pleasure and living in the present: “Most of the time [Luo Tong] cared only about eating, drinking and having a good time, coming out only when hunger pangs sent him looking for money” (Mo 27). Setting himself apart from men like Lao Lan, who uses brute force to reach his goals, Luo Tong “made his living by his wits,” using his intelligence to carve out a niche in the community he is part of (Mo 27). Luo Tong can therefore be interpreted as embodying the “wen” aspect of pre-revolution Chinese masculinity, making him a man who enacts a subordinated form of masculinity in Communist China. He fails to fulfil the basic expectations for men in his time; while the “lazy, gluttonous” Luo Tong is tasked with being the family’s breadwinner, his wife (Yang Yuzhen) and son (Luo Xiaotong) are forced to “[live] a life of extremes, with potfuls of meat on the stove during the good times and empty pots during the bad” (Mo 23).

A pivotal moment occurs in the novel when Luo Tong returns to his wife and son with his new daughter (Mo 67). Where he did not seem to have a large ego before, he now takes pride in being an authoritative figure (Mo 37-40, 35-36). However, during his homecoming, his son and wife also encounter a pitiful Luo Tong (Mo 67). Because Luo Tong defers to his new wife Yang Yuzhen in all decisions and has become Lao Lan’s employee, he is now only seen as Yang Yuzhen’s husband and Lao Lan’s

henchman (Mo 218), prompting comments that question his masculinity (Mo 182). Furthermore, Luo Tong is suddenly considered as being inferior to his own son: “‘Your father’s the plant manager’ [...] ‘but you run the show’ [...] ‘It’s what everyone thinks.’” (Mo 266). After his return, Luo Tong thus becomes a pariah who is seen as having been unable to achieve the village’s ideals of masculinity. He fares even worse due to continuous comparisons to the prosperous and dominant Lao Lan, his old rival. This comparison leads to Luo Tong being considered even less of a man, and therefore embodying male femininity: he is male by sex, but unmasculine/feminine by behaviour. The repeated comparisons in the novel of Luo Tong with more dominant personalities—both female and male—such as his rival Lao Lan, his wife Yang Yuzhen, and his son Luo Xiaotong lead to further emasculation. This experience deeply affects him and results in a fragile masculinity that in turn causes him to tell his family that he is useless and without talent (Mo 244).

Although Lao Lan regularly engages in aggressive displays of hegemonic masculinity, he also asserts his dominance more subtly. One example is when he is invited by Yang Yuzhen and Luo Tong to dinner, and sends his personal bodyguard away to his house twice for luxurious and expensive food (Mo 156). This behaviour is meant to demonstrate to Luo Tong that he is more prosperous and powerful, although he represents his actions as attempts to be friendly. Instead of being friendly, however, he is manipulative and understands that recruiting Luo Tong into his illegal meat business means asserting dominance over him as his employer. To ensure his revenge, Lao Lan continuously courts the Luo Tong’s family, sending them gifts (Mo 169, 199), knowing that this will force the poverty-stricken Luo Tong to become his employee.

His former rival’s and soon-to-be employee’s family even become regular visitors at the Lan household (Mo 201). This connection earns Luo Tong back some of the villagers’ respect at a time when he is not viewed positively, but it simultaneously cements the idea in the villagers’ minds that he is powerless and depends on Lao Lan for employment. Lao Lan’s efforts at asserting dominance over Luo Tong are successful, as Luo Tong eventually feels compelled to reciprocate the ostensible acts of kindness by working for Lao Lan: “From now on I’ll be his advance foot soldier and repay a favour with a favour” (Mo 164), he notes. Lao Tong even admits to Lao Lan that the latter is the better man in a display of subordinated masculinity that indicates his recognition of Lao Lan’s superiority: “Not until this moment have I been convinced that you are better than me. Now I know it to be true” (Mo 156). Through cunning manipulation and a subtle display of power masked beneath overtures for friendship, Lao Lan asserts his dominance over Luo Tong, forcing him into submission and, in the eyes of a society valuing male dominance and

strength, into a state of emasculation. Ultimately, Luo Tong faces an inglorious end: he murders his wife Yang Yuzhen because he suspects her of committing adultery with Lao Lan and is arrested (Mo 345). Tragically, this is the only moment in the novel, when Luo Tong regains some form of power (if one accepts the premise that enacting violence against someone means holding power over them). Importantly, though, he does not gain power by directly challenging his adversary; he only violently asserts power over his wife. Unable to conceive of a way of challenging Lao Lan's hegemonic masculinity, he murders Yang Yuzhen in a desperate, but ultimately futile, attempt to contest his emasculation by Lao Lan.

While Lao Lan is portrayed in the novel as a powerful man who outwardly embodies hegemonic masculinity, Luo Tong is portrayed as a feminine man and a pariah who enacts a subordinated form of masculinity and commits extreme gender-based violence as a result. Luo Tong's expression of subordinated masculinity is portrayed as unsuccessful and destructive, but so is the toxic hegemonic masculinity of Lao Lan. Indeed, as outlined before, Lao Lan is plagued by a sense of fragile masculinity that forces him to prove his masculinity to others and himself, a torturous effort that harms him as well as those around him. Essentially, neither masculinity at either extreme end of the spectrum is considered ideal in *Pow!*, signalling that the post-revolution Chinese concept of masculinity, as depicted and criticized by Mo, fails all men and women by fuelling endless competition between men, causing crises of masculinity, and leading to gender-based violence. Similar to the main character of *Things Fall Apart*, Luo Tong's son Luo Xiaotong is forever burdened by his father's failures of masculinity and feels compelled to exact revenge on behalf of his father (Mo 351), implying that the Chinese construction of masculinity causes intergenerational trauma too.

Comparing Masculinities in *Things Fall Apart* and *Pow!*

Despite depicting very different societies and time periods, the two novels contain remarkably similar portrayals of masculinities. There are clear parallels between Okonkwo and Lao Lan and between Unoka and Luo Tong, as well as between the dynamics of the respective duos. Both Okonkwo and Lao Lan require constant validation from other men because they wish to prove to others and themselves that they embody the hegemonic masculine ideal. To combat the fragile masculinity, they hide beneath a façade of dominance, they engage in and ultimately exaggerate what their respective society sees as stereotypically masculine behaviour. For both men, trying to enact a form of hegemonic masculinity leads to toxic masculine behaviour in that both display verbal and physical aggression towards other men and women. Both Lao Lan

and Okonkwo are ambitious and both strive to achieve recognition and wealth without considering the consequences of their actions. In stark contrast, Luo Tong's relatively unambitious nature resembles Unoka's; both men live in the moment without accomplishing much according to their communities' values. Like Unoka, Luo Tong believes in enjoying life when the circumstances allow it and accepts suffering when they don't. Because they do not actively shape these circumstances and create wealth for themselves and their families, both men are considered failures by their communities and, more importantly perhaps, by their sons. However, all four men have one common characteristic: their lifelong struggle with a sense of fragile masculinity.

In comparison to Okonkwo and Lao Lan, Unoka and Luo Tong are relatively unambitious men who initially do not resort to stereotypically masculine behaviours to assert their masculinity. Both men suffer as a result: Unoka struggles with poverty, is often unable to feed his family, owes heavy debts, and is persistently mocked as being womanly; Luo Tong, by contrast, reacts with violence to falling from grace and being considered inferior to his enemy, his own wife, and son. While Unoka is able to enjoy life by indulging in his passion for music, which suggests that he resigns himself at least partly to the fact that he occupies a subordinate social position in the eyes of many, Luo Tong does not have such coping mechanisms. He does not make peace with the subordinate position he is forced into and becomes violent. Ultimately, neither man succeeds in fulfilling the roles and taking on the positions expected of them in the gendered societies they are part of. Even more, they are separated from society: Unoka dies alone and in pain after he becomes sick from an illness that denies him a dignified burial, whereas Luo Tong is imprisoned for uxoricide. Both men struggle throughout the novels with conforming to masculinity ideals and with having to combat their own sense of fragile masculinity. In both novels, the men's struggles have highly negative effects on their families. The characters of Unoka and Luo Tong thus demonstrate how ideals of hegemonic masculinity turned toxic are harmful not only for those men who embody a subordinated masculinity or male femininity and are thus perceived as failures, but also for society at large.

Describing Unoka's and Luo Tong's masculinities as subordinate and as failures in relation to the hegemonic ideal might suggest that Okonkwo and Lao Lan are superior with regard to the masculinity they display and thus successful characters. This is not the case, though. Okonkwo's and Lao Lan's toxic hegemonic masculinity does not save them from suffering: Okonkwo kills himself after suffering what he perceives as emasculation after violating important tenets of his tribe, while Lao Lan is seriously injured by Luo Xiaotong, which in the violent logic of dominance he

subscribes to is also an emasculating experience. Furthermore, the pressure of embodying hegemonic masculinity in all aspects and circumstances means that both men constantly suffer from a sense of fragile masculinity, forcing them to constantly make efforts to appear strong and to prove their manhood to others and themselves. While striving for hegemonic ideals of masculinity and embodying toxic masculinity may thus initially bring them success, this success is short-lived. It ultimately leads to failure and distress. Okonkwo and Lao Lan prove that toxic hegemonic masculinity, too, leads men to failure.

Conclusions

Both *Things Fall Apart* and *Pow!* depict societies in which stereotypical enactments of hegemonic masculinity are valued over other traits, which are in turn considered either 'unmasculine' or 'feminine.' However, both Achebe and Mo also indicate that being in possession of, or approaching stereotypical/hegemonic/toxic masculinity does not guarantee success in life and happiness; on the contrary, the obsession with being a real man is a hindrance to success and happiness. Regardless of their relative proximity to valued forms of male masculinity or devalued forms of male femininity, all four men meet a tragic end as they subscribe to the social constraints that limited their choices of gender expression and enactment. While initially seeming advantageous to some men, the system harms them all, albeit in different ways. It also harms women.

Both novels demonstrate that a rigidly binary gender system does not serve men on either end of the masculinity spectrum; instead of showing a path to success, it leads to humiliation, loss of power, and even death. The novels also illustrate how both hegemonic and subordinate masculinity can become toxic and harmful to everyone around the men competing against each in an attempt to fulfil the ideal. While *Pow!* does not provide alternatives, that is to say, less harmful types of masculinities, *Things Fall Apart* does in the characters of the thoughtful Obierika and the wise Uchendu. Both men are mindful of the repercussions of their actions and their ability to think before they act is presented as embodying a healthy form of masculinity that may be able to counterweigh or balance out Okonkwo's toxic hegemonic masculinity and Unoka's subordinated masculinity. Although it does not provide characters that embody such alternative masculinities, *Pow!* makes the same point by omission.

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