

Caste, Culture, and the Crisis of Masculinity: Re-evaluating Unoka and Lakha

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Abstract

This study undertakes a comparative exploration of the paternal figures in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, specifically Unoka and Lakha, as cultural symbols deeply embedded in postcolonial and caste-based narratives of masculine identity. Far from being mere failed fathers in the traditional or domestic sense, Unoka and Lakha represent ruptured masculinities—figures shaped, constrained, and ultimately undone by the historical forces of colonial subjugation and caste-based marginalization. Through a critical postcolonial lens, the research interrogates how masculinity, trauma, and authority are negotiated within these literary spaces, exposing the quiet violence that pervades not only political structures but also the most intimate familial relationships.

Keywords: Unoka – Lakha – Fatherhood – Caste masculinity

1. Introduction

Father figures in literature often act as microcosms of broader socio-political forces, especially in contexts where colonial disruption has fractured traditional authority. In the postcolonial canon, they stand at the intersection of familial intimacy and historical trauma. The father-son relationship, typically seen as a private affair, becomes a potent site of ideological contestation. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* exemplify how literary paternal characters mediate between indigenous identities and external forces of colonialism or caste hegemony. Unoka and Lakha are not merely flawed patriarchs; they embody the erosion and distortion of traditional values under oppressive regimes.

These paternal figures defy conventional expectations—not through active resistance, but through a passivity born of despair, exclusion, or artistic sensibility. Their perceived failure becomes a site of critique: not of them as individuals, but of the systems that render them impotent. The sons, Okonkwo and Bakha, attempt to negotiate or escape this inheritance, but in doing so, reveal the lingering psychological imprint of paternal inadequacy and systemic violence. The father, then, is both cause and casualty—a representation of what happens when colonial and caste orders are internalized and reproduced.

Set against the backdrop of the British Empire's intervention in indigenous traditions, both novels depict the collapse of communal values and the emergence of alien norms that prioritize conquest, materialism, and hierarchy. Unoka, in Achebe's work, becomes an emblem of a disappearing precolonial ethos—one rooted in music, storytelling, and communal festivity. His apparent failure is not one of character but of context: he exists at odds with a shifting cultural paradigm that no longer recognizes emotional depth, artistic sensibility, or non-competitive existence as masculine virtues. His son, Okonkwo,

internalizes this shift, responding not with empathy but with fear and repression, embodying a hypermasculine identity that ultimately leads to his tragic downfall.

Lakha, in Anand's narrative, similarly represents a figure of compromised authority, living under the crushing weight of caste discrimination. Although he outwardly performs the role of patriarch, his power is deeply fragile, sustained more by internalized oppression than genuine familial influence. His interactions with his son, Bakha, are marked not by emotional connection but by silence and harsh instruction, underscoring the ways in which systemic degradation infiltrates the home. The paradox of the caste system—that the sweepers are vital to societal functioning yet remain socially reviled—defines Lakha's fractured identity. His role is not merely that of a victim but also, tragically, a transmitter of the very structures that dehumanize him.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Pierre Bourdieu, the study examines how colonial and caste-based hierarchies manipulate perceptions of masculinity, self-worth, and familial power. Concepts such as symbolic violence, colonial ambivalence, and intergenerational trauma are mobilized to understand the lived realities of these characters, both as individuals and as cultural archetypes.

Ultimately, the paper argues that Achebe and Anand reposition the domestic sphere as a crucible of cultural conflict, where public systems of domination are mirrored, reproduced, and occasionally resisted. Unoka and Lakha are not simply passive casualties; they offer a quiet critique of hegemonic masculinity, resisting the idea that strength must be performative or violent. Their stories illuminate how the legacies of oppression do not always erupt in revolt but may persist in silence, memory, and the painful transmission of inherited trauma. These nuanced portrayals compel readers to reconsider not only what constitutes masculinity, but also where true resistance begins.

2. Historical and Cultural Contexts

Achebe's Igbo society is portrayed at the precipice of cultural transformation. The arrival of missionaries and British administrators introduces epistemological violence—Christianity and Western education undermine local belief systems and delegitimize indigenous governance. Unoka, a man of music and festivals, is a remnant of a pre-colonial order that values aesthetics, oral tradition, and communal joy. His marginalization is not accidental—it aligns with a new paradigm that elevates productivity, individualism, and conquest. Okonkwo's contempt for Unoka is symptomatic of a broader cultural shift induced by colonial influence that conflates masculinity with domination and rejects the soft power of storytelling and art.

Similarly, Anand's *Untouchable* emerges from a historical moment where British colonialism had reified caste divisions. Although the British claimed a civilizing mission, their policies entrenched social stratification. The sweepers and scavengers, who literally sustained public sanitation, were denied dignity and upward mobility. Lakha, the patriarch of such a household, reflects the psychological toll of this structural violence. He performs his role with reluctant resignation, clinging to scraps of authority over his son, mirroring the hierarchical violence he himself experiences.

3. Unoka as a Counter-Cultural Figure

Unoka's artistic disposition challenges the prevailing Igbo ideal of the *nná ochie*—a revered masculine elder. His music and storytelling suggest a different model of social value, one rooted in cultural memory and emotional expression. In many ways, Unoka is the keeper of Igbo aesthetics. Achebe does not romanticize Unoka, but he provides an implicit critique of a society that equates success with aggression and wealth. Unoka's contentment, despite material poverty, subverts the narrative of lack—suggesting that failure in capitalist or patriarchal terms may still be a form of integrity.

In light of postcolonial theory, Unoka can be seen as embodying the *precolonial subject* whose values become obsolete in the face of modernity. His erasure is both symbolic and literal: Okonkwo erases him from memory, and society erases his values from cultural currency. Yet his influence lingers, haunting Okonkwo's every action. His symbolic presence critiques the masculinist, colonial model that demands self-denial in the name of conformity.

4. Lakha and the Burden of Oppression

Lakha's character provides a devastating portrait of how oppression shapes identity. His gruffness masks vulnerability; his commands reflect desperation. Anand's realism captures the tension between necessity and dignity. Lakha's labor is vital to urban hygiene, yet he is reviled. This paradox is the crux of caste violence—essential yet despised. His fatherhood is compromised by his constant humiliation, which he displaces onto Bakha. He cannot provide dignity because he has never known it.

Anand links Lakha's complicity to his survival instinct. He clings to his role as Jamadar not because of power, but because of routine—a familiar, if oppressive, order. His domination over Bakha is not natural but constructed, inherited from the very caste logic that brands him impure. This transmission of trauma through paternal channels is deeply postcolonial: it exemplifies how hegemony works through familial intimacy, making the home a site of ideological reproduction.

5. Postcolonial Masculinity and Rebellion

Okonkwo and Bakha represent divergent forms of masculine rebellion. Okonkwo embraces an exaggerated, hyper-masculine identity to escape the shame of his father. This performativity is ultimately unsustainable. His violent outbursts, his harsh parenting, and his rigidity are all acts of overcompensation. Achebe critiques the binary between strength and weakness by showing how Okonkwo's inability to mourn, weep, or compromise leads to social and spiritual death.

Bakha, on the other hand, turns outward—toward the colonizer—for affirmation. His mimicry of British behavior is not mere sycophancy but a survival tactic. His Anglicized gestures reflect what Bhabha terms “colonial ambivalence”—simultaneously desiring and resenting the colonizer. Bakha's tragedy lies in his in-between-ness: neither fully Indian nor accepted by the British. His masculinity is not asserted through violence but through longing, through silent defiance, and through fantasy. He seeks liberation not through dominance, but through dignity.

6. Father-Son Dynamics and Inherited Trauma

The father-son relationships in these novels underscore a recurring theme in postcolonial literature: the transmission of trauma. Okonkwo internalizes Unoka's shame, but instead of healing, he represses it—turning tenderness into rage. Achebe's portrayal of the Ikemefuna episode is pivotal: it marks the moment where paternal love is overridden by social expectation. Okonkwo's hand, guided by cultural loyalty, becomes an instrument of tragic loss.

Lakha and Bakha represent a different dynamic—one not of overcompensation, but of emotional void. Lakha never bestows affirmation; Bakha never receives it. Their interactions are marked by command, obedience, and silence. Anand uses this silence as a literary device—where dialogue might humanize, its absence dehumanizes. The result is a portrait of a household where love cannot flourish because survival takes precedence.

7. Literary Significance and Broader Implications

Achebe and Anand elevate the domestic to the political. Their paternal characters are not marginal figures—they are narrative keystones. Through Unoka and Lakha, we see how colonialism and caste systems corrupt the most intimate relationships. Yet these fathers also contain the seeds of counter-narrative: Unoka through imagination, Lakha through embodied suffering.

The refusal to render these characters heroic or villainous is itself a political act. They are portrayed with complexity, nuance, and contradiction. This ambivalence invites readers to question received hierarchies—both social and literary. In portraying these flawed fathers, Achebe and Anand challenge the reader to reconsider where resistance lies. Not always in bold action, but sometimes in enduring, remembering, and refusing to replicate harm.

8. Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Untouchable*, the figure of the father becomes a lens through which postcolonial legacies are examined and critiqued. Unoka and Lakha are not failures by choice, but by design—formed and deformed by systems that deny them value, dignity, and agency. Their sons, shaped in rebellion or in shame, reflect the enduring impact of this denied legacy. Achebe and Anand do not offer salvation, but they do offer recognition: of pain, of silence, of fractured love. Their work reminds us that liberation must begin at home—not only in resistance to systems but in the reclamation of self-worth, intimacy, and intergenerational healing.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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