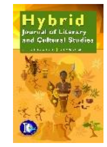
Who is a father? Deconstructing the machismo of fatherhood in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* (2015)



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Abstract

This paper deconstructs the patriarchal institution of fatherhood that tends to present fatherhood as a machismo that the family must rely on for its sustenance and survival. The paper argues that the patriarchal ideology of fatherhood which is backed by culture obstructs the psyche of women and thereby affect their ability to rise to the challenge of being sole care givers for their children when the circumstance or situation calls for it, and by their actions affect the children who are at the receiving end of parenting. The study refers to Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction to show how the conflicting forces within the traditional concept of fatherhood serve to dissipate its seeming definiteness and undermine its presupposed priority in a model of parenthood. The study builds its argument by relying on the aspect of the deconstruction theory which posits that appearance is more relevant than essence. (Stanford, 2006) This study is conducted using Chigozie Obioma's novel, *The Fishermen*, as the main reference text. However, references are made to other texts where necessary.

Keywords: deconstruction, fatherhood, fathers, machismo, parenting

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Public Interest Statement

In many cultures in Africa and other parts of the world, fathers are presented with machismo personalities that often make them larger than life and places them as the centre of family life. In fact, some cultures believe that the family cannot function without the father. However, due to varied reasons, women continue to find themselves in positions where they are primary caregivers to children. There is also a myriad of examples of women who have succeeded in the up-bringing of male children without support from adult males. As such, this paper focuses on empowering women to be able to stand as single parents when the circumstances require of them to do so.

Introduction

In many African cultures, including Ghana, there is in existence the cultural belief that it is the sole responsibility of men to raise boys. As such, when a woman becomes the mother of sons, the community expects that she must have a man by her side to help her raise her sons. In fact, women who are single parents to sons are always under pressure to ensure that their sons are being raised by men or their fathers. This is a cultural practise that women have come to believe and rely on so much that some women remain in toxic relationships because their cultures believe that they must have in their lives the presence of men in order to successfully raise their sons. In fact, in many African societies, parenting as an institution relies heavily on patriarchy. There is also enough evidence to show that cultures from other parts of the world place a lot of focus on fatherhood. Evidence of this is present in the number of existing sociological research on the roles and positions of fathers. For instance, one such research conducted by Yogman & Garfield (2016) sought to define fathers and their roles:

> Defining who is a father must account for the diversity of fathering that occurs. Most children have a father, whether he is currently residing with them or living separately. Some children have a single father or 2 parents who are both fathers. Children in a blended family may have both a biological non-resident father and a stepfather. Some gay men and lesbians have created families in which children have 3 or 4 adults in a parenting role, with 1 or 2 of them being fathers. Some children do not have a male figure involved in raising them (eg, those whose parent is a single mother, by choice or circumstance, and those whose parents are a lesbian couple) (p.2)

Also, Hammer, (1998) conducted interviews asking men and women their definitions of who an "ideal" father is. According to Hammer (1998), one respondent, a mother, defined fathers as: "first biological. He takes care of the child he helped bring into this world ... By that I mean he sees to it that his children have what they need to stay healthy. For example, enough food to eat and a roof over their heads. He provides for their everyday needs." (p.88) Another respondent, a father, stated that: "a good father puts his family first, above all else. He's a role model to his daughters and his sons. He's the strong shoulder for them to cry on. Now, he loves them unconditionally but he disciplines them when the mother ain't strong enough to do it." (p.88)

In fact, Yogman & Garfield and Hammer are not alone in their research into fatherhood. Lemay et al (2010) also researched into what it meant to be a good father among young, adolescent fathers. According to Lemay et al (2010):

> When young and young expectant fathers were asked to describe the characteristics of a good father, one overriding theme—the concept of availability, primarily expressed as "being there"—emerged… Other themes characterizing a good father that emerged included the following: providing financial and emotional support; teaching, including lessons and values; and assuming responsibility for one's child. (p. 224)

The work of the above-mentioned researchers—Yogman, Hammer and Lemay are existing literature that proves the importance different societies place on fatherhood. However, this study raises the question—what happens in a situation where there is no father present to raise male children? The study answers this question by arguing that the mother who is present and a single parent should be able to raise sons into responsible men. However, in order for the woman to be able to do this, there is a need to deconstruct the cultural notion that women cannot raise sons without the presence of a man. This belief propagated in some African cultures have led to the disintegration of family life when men are not present due to varied reasons. As such, this study sets out with the objective to prove that in Chigozie Obioma's novel, *The Fishermen*, it is not the absence of the father that causes the disintegration of the family, but the cultural belief of the machismo presence of the father in order to function is what disintegrates the family. In order to achieve the objective of this study, the discussion will focus on how the cultural representation of fatherhood cancels itself from within due to the actions and inactions of the father figure in the novel under discussion. As the discussion deconstructs the cultural notion of fatherhood, an alternative is brought to the fore. This alternative suggests a flexible parental model, where there are no strictly defined father/mother roles, but one fluid continuum of parental responsibilities. As such there is the need to understand the concept of parenting.

In presenting the concept of parenting, Smetana (2017) refers to Baumrind mentioning that "Baumrind's influential model of parenting styles describes parenting as a gestalt of integrated parenting practices, best studied using pattern-based approaches." (p.19) Then Smetana discusses the various parenting styles by Baumrind from different cultures using case studies from the selected cultures. For instance, Smetana posits that authoritarian parenting is not part of the Western culture. She however, cites examples of such parenting models from among Chinese families living in America. This form of parenting, Smetana explains, becomes necessary due to the cultural differences as well as poor adjustments to their new situation in the new suburbs they find themselves when living in western nations. Smetana explains that Chinese mothers are referred to as "tiger moms." Smetana (2017)

After studying Smetana's research, this researcher defines parenting as the systematic nurturing of infants right into adulthood by responsible adults based on their cultural beliefs, socio-economic abilities as well as their situational circumstances. This researcher's definition of parenting brings together four main components: responsible adults, cultural beliefs, socio-economic abilities and situational circumstances. This is because this researcher believes that these four components must be present in order to achieve successful parenting. However, some African societies only make room for cultural beliefs that are steeped in patriarchy especially where male children are concerned. As such, this cultural belief and practise takes away a woman's ability to be a meaningful and successful parent to male children when a man is not present. And it is this unfortunate cultural bias that ends up affecting children (especially male children) that this study seeks to challenge.

In order to challenge this cultural practise, this study employs Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. It is important to note that Derrida provides various definitions of deconstruction. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on the aspect of Derrida's deconstruction theory which "attacks this belief by **reversing** the Platonistic hierarchies: the hierarchies between the invisible or intelligible and the visible or sensible; between essence and appearance;" (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/2006) This definition of deconstruction by Derrida challenges the hierarchy that places essence (which this researcher defines or interprets as what is considered to be important or how things ought to be) as most important or at a higher order than appearance (which this researcher defines or interprets as what is or the true nature of any given situation at any point in time). This definition raises the argument that the order of importance cannot rely on just the cultural belief of what any given society considers topmost on its hierarchical order, but that situations and circumstances at any given point in time must be considered and given priority when the hierarchy of cultural beliefs are being arranged. As such, it will be a great disservice to children (male children) to prioritise a patriarchal order in the family setting (in the situation where the raising of male children are concerned) when the reality remains that not every family with male children would have the 'privilege' of being raised by a father who is supported by his wife.

In fact, the novel under discussion posits the ideology of the disintegration of the family unit as a result of the father (who in the novel is given the sole responsibility of raising his sons) leaving home to take up a job transfer in another town. Therefore, this study sets out to argue that it is not the absence of the father that causes his sons to go astray, but however, the cultural belief system that cripples the ability of the mother to function effectively as a parent should, as well as the absence of a 'parent' to steer the boys in the right direction. In order to strengthen the argument of the study, there is the need to direct focus to the text (novel).

Deconstructing the machismo of fatherhood

Chigozie Obioma, through his character, Ben, begins his narration of events with gloom. The onset of the plot clearly indicates the looming danger the reader is about to experience as a result of the transfer of the father, Eme, by his employers, the Central Bank of Nigeria, from their home in Akure to Yola; a place Ben describes as "a town in the north that was a camel distance of more than one thousand kilometres away." (p.9) This gloom is also evident in their mother, Adaku's response to the transfer news. Ben describes Adaku's demeanour on receiving the news: "she acquired the gait of a wet mouse, averting her eyes as she went about the house." (p.9) The news of her husband's transfer diminishes her. Adaku feels lost and defeated and she confirms this when according to Ben, she says to the hearing of her children that: "what kind of job takes a man away from bringing up his growing sons? Even if I were born with seven hands, how would I be able to care for these children alone?" (p.10) By this statement Adaku diminishes her self-worth. She has consciously told herself that she cannot bring up her sons without her husband at her side. Also, her use of the statement—"seven hands," symbolises a show of strength that she does not have. Her statement, "seven hands" also symbolises a show of strength appropriated to her husband, Eme, just for being born male. Because Eme is a man, he naturally has "seven hands" to be able to take care of his sons in ways that Adaku cannot. This statement is an indication of a major defect—the cultural notion of fatherhood as a rigid institution epitomised by the male sex in such a way that being a father carries within its understanding of the concept of fatherhood, the idea of a machismo appearance without taking into consideration the fact that fatherhood and motherhood must intertwine to create effective parenting which should be the concept that takes eminence. For instance, Ben-Daniels & Co. (2020) refers to this cultural idea of appropriating almost every family and social responsibility to males as an overburdening of the male figure without the consideration as to whether or not the male in question has the capacity for such responsibilities.

The idea of appropriating every social and family responsibility to males just as a result of their biological identification is a cultural ideology. As such, in the family setting, the father is placed at the top of the hierarchy. This means that if the father is out of the picture, the family begins to disintegrate. However, this should not be the case. If there is a mother, she should be able to take up the role of a parent. Unfortunately, cultural beliefs and practises can hinder some women from taking up the role of parenting (especially sons) if a man is absent. Interestingly, Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory questions the reasoning of such cultural ideologies as exhibited in the novel. As such, within the confines of the novel, essence (which can be identified as Eme's presence at home playing his role as a father) must be replaced with appearance (which can be identified as Adaku's presence as the only parent physically present with the children at home). Therefore, it is highly unfortunate that Adaku makes the statement of her inabilities in the presence of her children. By making that statement in the presence of the children, she reinforces the cultural belief and practise that a woman is incapable of raising sons alone. As a result of her statement, on a subconscious and conscious level, the boys do not 'fear' her presence. They undermine her authority by constantly breaking the rules set by their father. According to Ben: "we shelved our books and set out to explore the sacred world outside the one we were used to. We ventured to the municipality football pitch where most of the boys of the street played football every afternoon." (p.14) The boys clearly and comfortably begin disobeying rules because these rules have been set by their father who is no longer constantly present to enforce them. Adaku, does not see to the enforcing of the rules set by Eme because she strongly believes she has no abilities as a parent outside cooking for her children. Adaku's unfortunate cultural belief which contributes in limiting her capabilities as a mother needs to be opposed and proven wrong.

A typical example of the ability of women to oppose the cultural belief that makes them feel inadequate as parents (especially to sons in the absence of a male) is evident in Neshani Andrea's' novel, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*. When Mee Kauna visits her aunt, Mee Fennie, she sees that her aunt's life has improved. According to Ben-Daniels (2020), "Mee Fennie leaves an abusive marriage and decides to fend for herself and her three children." (p.64) And Mee Fennie succeeds. Her children are in school, her first child is a student at the university, her children are well-behaved and she is economically sound. Ben-Daniels (2020) Mee Kauna, she observes that:

> There had been some changes to the homestead since Kauna's first visit. Then there had only been three huts, a kitchen and two bedrooms. Now, all of the children had their own huts, and Mee Fennie had built herself a concrete bedroom. Her livestock had also increased from two goats to seven, and from two cows to five. More purple and white violets had grown around the homestead. Andreas (p. 78)

A sentence from the above quote reveals that all the "children had their own huts." This sentence is proof of Mee Fennie's success as a parent. Mee Kauna also adds that Mee Fennie's children, including her son, is also doing well at school. In fact, Mee Fennie's success in business and family life goes against every cultural belief held by her community. According to Mee Kauna, when Mee Fennie: "divorced her husband, the village people and all the prophets of doom, including her own relatives, predicted her downfall and her children starving. Nothing like that happened." Andreas (2001, p.126) In fact, Mee Fennie's success proves that the cultural belief in certain African societies which expect women to fail as single parents is a myth. Mee Fennie's success as a single parent aligns with this researcher's definition of parenting as defined in the introduction. In fact, Mee Fennie is the sort of positive parent example that Adaku should emulate.

As such, Adaku's over independence on her husband is unfortunate. Such over independence on one person within the family can lead to a disintegration of the family if that individual leaves the family for one reason or the other. An example of the negative effect of over independence on a single person within a family unit is evident in Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel, *Kintu*. Makumbi narrates: "when Kintu was away on kabaka's duties, Nnakato visited the wives, checking on the children and the state of the land they lived on … She also garnered, informally, local moods and major incidents, reporting back to Kintu." (p.14) So when

Nnakato commits suicide, Kintu is greatly affected. He wishes that her identical twin, Babirye, take up her place as Nnakato. According to Makumbi (2014):

> Kintu, the family, Mayirika and even Buddu Province hung on this moment. She could hold it or she could let everything crash… All she had to do was bury childless Babirye and resurrect Nnakato and life would go back to normal. Finally Kintu would worship her. But why should she die so that he could have his Nnakato back? (p. 80)

And so, Babirye refuses to pretend to become Nnakato and by so doing give Kintu strength. As a result of Babirye's refusal, Kintu "vanished that night." (p.81) Makumbi (2014) narrates: "once Kintu was seen in Lwera in the cave near Kalema's grave, but his mind was in disorder… After that he was never seen again. Kintu would get neither a grave nor funeral rites." (p.81) And just like that, Kintu's home collapses. His strength as a chief and a father died with Nnakato, his beloved wife. Kintu's story and the demise of his family affirms that the machismo appearance of fatherhood attached to some cultures is a myth.

Although in *Kintu*, the reader witnesses Kintu himself, a male, revealing his human weaknesses in the way he handles the loss of his wife, Nnakato; in Buchi Emecheta's autobiography, *Head Above Waters*, Emecheta herself, who had hoped to be an 'ideal wife' ends up leaving her marriage after her husband burns the first story she wrote. Emecheta (1986) explains that "I knew then that my dream of being an ideal wife and mother was buried. Society never prepared us for lone parenthood." (p.32) Regardless of her lack of preparedness, when her husband, Sylvester, denies her and their five children, with a sixth on the way, in court, Emecheta takes up the responsibility of raising her children as an immigrant in London and does a fine job raising them alone. Although the Igbo community frowned at a woman leaving her husband, Emecheta never looked back. After all, Sylvester was not willing to provide for his children. The cultural notion of fatherhood as an all-powerful institution is debunked through Emecheta's resolve of leaving her marriage and successfully providing for physical needs as well as giving guidance to her children despite the challenges she lived through in England. In fact, the actions of these 'supposed fathers' show how the machismo attributed to fatherhood continuously cancels itself from within through the actions and inactions of these 'supposed fathers.' At the end, Emecheta recounts that her eldest daughter, Chiedu, asks her: "why did you marry that man, mum? … the man you call our father." (p.226) This question by Sylvester's own child is clear evidence that the strength society and culture bestow on fathers is a cultural myth that is lost in this instance.

However, this perceived 'father strength' affects Adaku and cements her inability to enforce the rules set by her husband for their sons. Her inability to play father and mother is what creates the gulf between Adaku and her children and also the gulf between Eme and the children. Adaku's shortcomings as a parent is evident in her failure to notice that her sons have been going fishing in a river perceived by the community to be a dangerous place. When she finally discovers that they have been fishing she does not assert her authority as the present parent to ensure discipline. This is because Adaku has still not accepted her present position as mother and father and as such, she quickly reverts to the cultural belief that only their father can instil discipline. She informs the boys that: "I will tell Eme what you have done. I'm certain that if he hears it, he will leave everything else and return here. I know him …" (p.30) This statement alone shows the extent of her dependence on her husband, the 'all-powerful father.' And by this statement, she further deepens that unconscious psychological disregard that her sons have for her as a parent and also further relinquishes her position as mother. She unfortunately fails to realise that the position of Eme as father, with all its machismo attributes have been stripped away from him due to his absence. And by the loss of Eme's fatherhood, Adaku's lack of a show of strength and authority as their mother and substantive parent is the greatest compelling force that propels the confidence with which the boys exact revenge on their neighbour for telling about their fishing escapades. Furthermore, Adaku's decision to wait for her husband's return before the boys are disciplined, subconsciously nurtures rebellion in the minds of the boys, especially, the eldest, Ikenna.

As such, by the time Ikenna receives the heaviest whipping from his father, rebellion has deeply taken seed in his heart. Ikenna waits for his father's departure and then begins to exhibit his "metamorphosis". The fear of the presence of his father has been taken away because his mother's reiteration of her husband's absence and its eminent adverse effect has deeply taken seed in him. Therefore, Ikenna no longer weighs the consequences of his actions. He is no longer afraid of the action his father would take if he receives information of his misdeeds. His mother on the other hand, has not asserted her parental rights and abilities, and by her actions, has created a void which Ikenna fills with his negative and destructive metamorphosis thereby psychologically and physically deconstructing the 'perceived strength' of Eme's position as a father.

In fact, Adaku's attitude is not the norm in many societies. There are countless researches that are focused on fathers because mothers are known to play very influential roles in the lives of their children. For instance, Christina Clark (2009), conducts a research on the importance of fathers in the literacy of their children. Clark explains that this research is necessary because mothers have been left with the responsibility of parenting. Another example is Cabrera & Co. (2000), who also conduct a similar research investigating into fathers' involvement in the lives of their children because according to them; in their introduction: "the constant presence of mothers as children's primary caregivers fostered the implicit assumption that father–child relationships had little impact on children's development, and this popular belief was reinforced by developmental theorists throughout most of the century." (p.127) In as much as one might argue that these researches further deepen the helplessness of women in parenting, and also insist on projecting patriarchy in the family setting, (after all, the socio-economic realities of contemporary societies tend to make the ideal; father and mother raising children together under one roof an illusion) they are also silent proof of the fact that women are raising children alone due to varied reasons. For instance, Ben, confirms that his father was "an only child who had grown up with his mother … " (p.31) Although Ben does not explain why it was so, the readers are witnesses to the fact that Eme's mother raised him well and gave him a good education. So how is it that Eme's wife cannot raise her sons with Eme assisting from a distance? The cultural over dependence on the man is to blame for this.

In addition, all through the novel, Eme does not make an effort to refute his machismo fatherhood position and accept a model of parenting relationship which will equally place Adaku, at the centre next to him. Evidence of this is seen in how he is the only one who must return home to punish the boys for their misdeeds. For instance, before Eme leaves for Yola, he cautions the boys that he: "will call her regularly, and if I hear any bad news—he stuck his forefinger aloft to fortify his words—I mean any funny acts at all, I'll give you the Guerdon for them." (Obioma, 2015, p. 11) Again, he is also the only one who checks on their progress at school and their conduct at home. For instance, Ben explains that their father visited them 'every other weekend.' He however narrates that:

> As we slowly became accustomed to seeing him every few weeks or so, things changed. His mammoth frame that commandeered decorum and calm, gradually shrunk into the size of a pea. His established routine of composure, obedience, study, and compulsory siesta—long a pattern of our daily existence—gradually lost its grip. (p. 13)

Ben's narration above uses very symbolic diction. "Mammoth" a huge elephant like animal of prehistoric existence, is used to describe their father, and this reinforces his machismo presence. The use of the word "pea" clearly deconstructs the cultural notion of Eme's position as father and leaves the children with no substitute or alternative in their mother. The use of "commandeered" represents some sort of a military camp with Eme as the commander who must be feared and obeyed. This space of the commander leaves out Adaku. This is in itself a cultural practise among certain African cultures. For instance, among the Igbos of Nigeria, a wife and her children call the husband/father, "father." This clearly shows the extent to which culture defines and abrogates roles in families.

This influence of culture in parenting styles is visible in Obioma's novel. The culture of the man as the head and leader of the family is what influences Adaku and makes her believe that regardless of the fact that she is the biological mother of her sons, she cannot raise them alone while her husband works in Yola in order to support them. In fact, one of Hamer's (1998) respondents answer as to who a father is supports this notion: "the father is the one who provides provisions but more importantly he shows them the way... He's somewhat or should be somewhat the leader. He handles situations and keeps the family safe and together..." (Hammer, 1998, p.88) Therefore, what happens in a situation where there is no father? Ben gives a vivid description of such: "his tongue was stuck out of his mouth from which a pool of white foam had trailed down to the floor, and his hands were splayed wide apart as though nailed to an invisible cross. Half-buried in his belly was the wooden end of Mother's kitchen knife, its sharp blade deep in his flesh." (p.148) And in fact, it is not only Ikenna who dies that day. His brother, Boja, also dies that day. This unfortunate turn of events is as a result of the fact that the family is not held together by both Adaku and Eme. The family is held together by just Eme's presence. Ben narrates that:

> When Father drove into the compound the morning after Ikenna died, she'd run up to him, opened the door of his car, and dragged him out of the car into the rain, screaming, strangling him by the collar in the rain. "Did I not tell you?" she cried. "Didn't I tell you they were fast slipping from my grip?" … Many times in the past four days, she'd tried to attack him … (p. 168)

In fact, Adaku blames her husband's absence for the death of her two sons, Ikenna and Boja. The irony of the situation however, lies in the fact that Ben informs the reader that Eme resigned from his job and returned home. Their father started a bookstore and was now home. However, his presence does not stop Ben, the narrator, and his brother, Obembe, from also slipping away. This is because Eme's position as father had already been cancelled from within, the moment he set off for Yola. As such, his return makes no difference because his position as father was built on a myth, he created himself when he should have been collaborating with his wife to build a fluid parenting institution. Obembe plans to avenge the death of his brothers whom he believes died because of Abulu, the madman's prophecy. Although Ben is not a willing partner, he joins his brother to kill Abulu. In the end, their parents lose all four sons. Obembe runs away and Ben is sent to prison for the murder of Abulu. In fact, Eme's departure creates a disintegration of the family and Adaku's cultural position of helplessness reinforces this disintegration. This unfortunately is a great defect that needs to be forestalled.

In order to forestall the sort of defect in parenting that Adaku and Eme exhibit, firstly, there is the need to disabuse the mind of women like Adaku that they cannot stand without their men and secondly there is the need to consider parenting as a gender-blind institution to a large extent. This implies that firstly, culture must make room for women to explore their potentials as equal partners in the family as well as societal space. It is by so doing that women can be psychologically prepared for the task of parenting without the support of men. Thirdly, the cultural practise of assigning specific roles to men and women in the family space needs to be reconsidered. These assignments create a psychological block. As a result, men and women in relationships begin to see certain tasks as not theirs. The rules, guidelines and expected outcomes need to be set in place and the available parent should be able to perform the task of parenting.

For instance, in Binwell Sinyangwe's novel, *A Cowrie of Hope*, Sinyangwe describes Nasula as "poor, illiterate and clothed in suffering, but she was an enlightened woman possessed with a sense of achievement. She had not tasted success in her own life, but she wanted her daughter to achieve much." (p.5) As such, even when her in-laws throw her and her daughter out into the streets with nothing after her husband dies, Nasula presses on to ensure that Sula gets the education that she needs. Nasula's ability to rise up to the task of being a single parent projects the need for why parenting as an institution cannot afford to be coloured by gender specific roles. Again, one might argue that in Nasula's case, she had no choice, she had to fill the role of both parents because she was a widow. Notwithstanding the difference in circumstances, Nasula shows the desired resilience in parenting that ought to be projected in all circumstances irrespective of gender and diversity in situations and conditions and also deconstructs the notion of the demi-god nature of fatherhood. After all, it is for this reason that in Amma Darko's *Faceless*, her character, Maa Tsuru, is constantly criticised for not stepping up as a parent ready to take up the role as both mother and father. Maa Tsuru's cultural upbringing and the fear of superstition locks her up in her room while her children end up in the streets.

These examples places emphasis on the fact that Adaku needed to be more like Nasula than Maa Tsuru. Whereas Nasula's circumstances were worse off than Adaku's, Nasula fought cultural beliefs and societal animosities to be a parent for her child. Adaku had a sound economic cushion among other things to help her. For instance, Ben reveals that in the neighbourhood, the other children often said: "that our father, "Mr. Agwu," was a rich man who worked in the Central Bank of Nigeria, and that we were privileged kids." (p.14) And they were in fact, "privileged kids." They had a father who was willing to pay for them to have the best education in Canada. They had a father who could afford to give them stipends which they spent on replacing footballs and buying fishing gear. In order to provide the middle-class comfortable life for his family, Ben's father needed to work, he needed to go away. The problem however, was that neither he nor his wife understood the multifaceted nature of their roles as parents. As such, his transfer revealed the cracks in the family they had built.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chigozie Obioma's novel, at first glance, projects the importance of fatherhood. However, as the story begins to unfold the reader comes face to face with the stark reality of the overburdening and excessive hyping of the institution of fatherhood based on cultural perspectives. The unfortunate turn of events in the novel reveals the cracks in the family and the weakness in the father figure that Eme had spent years building. The job of parenting which is meant to be carried out by both parents is performed by only one—the father. His parenting style has more to do with the fear of his presence than with the instilling of long-term moral and ethical values. As a result, when he lives for Yola and then later returns on the death of his first two sons, that thin lining of fear caused by his presence is dead. This proves that it is in fact, not just a matter of the father's presence at home that will ensure that the boys are kept in line; but however, a solid and unified front having both father and mother as equal partners in the parenting venture as well as a strong and psychologically prepared woman who has the strength to be father and mother when the situation requires her to be.

Therefore, the successful deconstruction of the cultural institution of fatherhood as a machismo space would have seen Adaku psychologically prepared to raise her boys in the absence of their father. But the question is—who is responsible for deconstructing this patriarchal institution? Two parties can contribute to its deconstruction—women and the community. However, until communities collectively act, women must take control of their destinies and be prepared at all times to step in and take control of their families. As such, Adaku should have been prepared to raise her sons in the absence of their father

In essence, the novel reveals the extent of human shortcomings. Ben's father is just like any other human, any other man. Eme's machismo father presence which instils fear in the boys is only an illusion. Therefore, his departure creates a void that has always been present but just waiting to reveal itself when circumstances change. Perhaps the author believes that this novel reveals the displacement of a family due to the absence of the father. However, the novel equally reveals a deconstruction of fatherhood as a culturally influenced machismo institution. It proves that family life cannot run on the presence of a physically strong or fearful looking figure; and especially not parenting. The novel reveals that one needs to do more than just instilling fear. There is the need to set values to guide children as well as the need to understand and practise dynamic parenting that gives equal parenting responsibilities to men and women.

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