Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart* offers the reader a rich and comprehensive understanding of traditional Ibo society. It gives us an explanation of the nuances of this society, specifically in regards to the organization and distribution of power within the village of Umuofia. The novel achieves this explanation through its narration of the protagonist’s life. Okonkwo, a great man who holds two titles in his village, is the manifestation of patriarchal misogyny in the book, and we are provided with the explanations behind his actions. Although a critique of patriarchal African society may not have been Achebe’s primary objective in writing *Things Fall Apart*, readers have no choice but to immerse themselves in this culture, and many conflicting emotions arise as a result. The novel proves time and time again that the mother is not supreme; she is very much subordinate.

In the beginning of the novel, Achebe explains to the reader that femininity is associated with weakness. Okonkwo fervently subscribes to this idea; from a very early age, he arrives upon the conclusion that “*agbala* was not only another name for a woman,” it was also the most devastating insult that any man can be called (Achebe 13). Thus, he fervently rejects and actively loathes any qualities associated with femininity, such as “gentleness and... idleness” (Achebe 13). In several instances, Okonkwo degrades his peers by feminizing them and calling them women; he does this because he knows that this will “kill a man’s spirit” (Achebe 27). By feminizing other men, Okonkwo strives to assert his own masculinity and power, and he succeeds.
Achebe characterizes Ibo society as one that is almost completely based in the commodification of women. Within the novel, a man’s status is denoted by his wealth, and these descriptions of wealth do not merely include land property. They also include the number of wives a man has (Achebe 18). Thus, women are characterized as objects which men can purchase and subsequently possess in order to convey or elevate their social status. Additionally, Achebe’s portrayal of traditional Ibo marriage ceremonies is more reminiscent of a business transaction between prospective suitors and the fathers of young brides than of an egalitarian union between man and woman. In Achebe’s description of Akueke’s (the daughter of Obierika, Okonkwo’s best friend) bride price ceremony, he likens the young girl to fruit, “just ripe for marriage” (Achebe 71). The suitor and his relatives proceed to survey her for quality, much as one would survey an item being purchased at the market. Furthermore, the bride price ceremony only values the potential bride for the amount of goods she is worth. She becomes an expendable object, exchangeable for fifty pots of palm wine if she’s really valuable (Achebe 116).

Achebe also alludes to the fact that once a woman has been purchased from her family, there is virtually no way for her to escape from the confines of a tyrannical marriage. In Chapter 10, a woman has fled from her husband’s house because of his excessive physical abuse. The offender, Mgbafo, quite arrogantly asserts, “I married her with my money and my yams. I do not owe my in-laws anything” (Achebe 90). This passage struck me as odd. Mgbafo isn’t saying that he married his wife with his money and his yams; he is saying that he bought her with these material items, and he is demanding that his property be returned. Ultimately, he gets his wish, despite the fact that his wife fears for her life. The egwegwu suggest that Mgbafo change his ways and satiate his in-laws’ concerns with a pot of palm wine. There is no legal recompense for his violent crimes, and he is once again given complete access to his wife.
Generally speaking, Achebe depicts the lives of married women in Umuofia as very confined. There is a clear separation between the domestic and public spheres, and women are subordinate in both. In the public realm positions of power are reserved only for men, and the exclusion of females from positions of title and influence is etched in stone. Achebe comments on this exclusion several times in Chapter 10, a chapter which largely focuses on the rituals and methods of the egwugwu in channeling the spirits of their ancestors and distributing justice. He opens the chapter with the observation that all of the village members know that this is a men’s ceremony; even in their observation of the ceremony, women are pushed to the fringes of the crowd, treated as outsiders (Achebe 87). He continues his depiction of the egwugwu title with this description:

women never saw the inside of the [egwugwu] hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept their imagination to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan (Achebe 88).

Women fare much worse in the domestic realm than they do in the public realm. Okonkwo has three wives, but Achebe’s characterization of the relationship between Okonkwo and his wives is more reminiscent of ownership than any type of emotionally invested marriage. Okonkwo was truly the king of his household, and “his wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper” (Achebe 13). Okonkwo rules with an iron fist, demanding that his wives do as he commands. The slightest agitation from any of his wives inevitably results in a violent outburst, and Achebe provides ample examples of such outbursts. On one occasion, his youngest wife, Ojiugo, goes to a neighbor’s house to get her hair braided. Okonkwo returns to his compound, and finding that his midday meal has not been prepared, flies into a rage.
the wife in question returns, he beats her mercilessly and refuses to relent, even after he realizes that it is the Week of Peace (Achebe 29).

On another occasion, Okonkwo provokes a confrontation with his wives without provocation, claiming that one of them has killed a banana tree. “The tree was very much alive... [but] without further argument, Okonkwo proceeded to give [Ekwefi] a sound beating” (Achebe 38). The scene culminates when Okonkwo hears his wife muttering and proceeds to aim a loaded gun at her and then pulls the trigger. Luckily, the gun misfires, but this is the type of tyrannical behavior that the women of Umuofia must endure. Within the comforts of their own homes, they are still treated as second-class citizens and are subject to being beaten at the will of their husbands. The slightest agitation can elicit a violent and brutal response, and these women have no protection. Furthermore, these displays of violence are normalized, as evidenced in the exchange between Chielo and Ekwefi following her near-death experience. The event is made light of, and Chielo half-jokingly remarks, “your chi is very much awake, my friend” (Achebe 48).

Ultimately, Achebe provides the reader with more than ample evidence to indicate that “mother is not supreme.” Okonkwo scorns any emotions or actions that could be characterized as maternal, and he does this with no misgivings. In addition, Achebe paints a pretty bleak picture of the lives of women in Umuofia: they are treated as commodities, sold into marriage, and left with no escape from their abusive husbands. However, Achebe’s characterization of Okonkwo proves to be a legitimate attempt to refute patriarchal doctrines.

Okonkwo is the epitome of the traditional Ibo masculine ideal, and he literally falls apart. Readers witness his detachment from his children, and his ultimate falling-out with Nwoye, and realize these broken relationships are his fault, brought on by his refusal to give and accept love
out of the fear it will feminize him. Despite the fact that Okonkwo is a tyrant, one feels sympathy for him; he comes across more as a coward, afraid of emotional intimacy with his wives and his children. His dissociation from humanity and his refusal to accept some feminine traits ultimately cost him his life.
Works Cited