
**Okonkwo: Representing Pre-Colonial and Post-Colonial phase in Chinua
Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*****ManjinderKaur**

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Abstract: This paper highlights the impact of colonialism on Igbo society. It also shows how Okonkwo, in the earlier phase represents the Igbo culture and he was sent into exile for seven years and later on when he returns after seven years, he finds the Igbo society disintegrated and is unable to tolerate it and in the end commits suicide.

Keywords: Okonkwo, White missionaries, Igbo society.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* passes through three phases: pre-colonial phase, colonial phase that appears with the arrival of colonizers in the form of Christianity and later on the Post-colonial phase that began with the suicide of Okonkwo and the breakdown of indigenous belief and governance system.

Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel represents the first phase. He represents the unity of the Igbo society, their culture, norms, traditions and supremacy of the males. Achebe's novel treats the rise and fall of an Igbo man, Okonkwo, who is not an individual but type-character whose downfall and disintegration represents the disintegration of Igbo culture and society. Indeed, this three-part novel is structured around the three distinct phases of the protagonist's life, with the middle phase detailing his years of exile from Umuofia, his native village. The arc of Okonkwo's life conforms as well to Aristotle's conception of the tragic hero, "tragic flaw" and all. Yet, *Things Fall Apart* also concerns the triumphs and tragic demise of Okonkwo's village, Umuofia. Okonkwo's community, like the protagonist himself, is assaulted and ultimately ruptured and undone, by British colonial and modernizing influences.

Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young but he had

won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken titles and had shown incredible prowess in two tribal wars. Moreover, Okonkwo, "A man of action, a man of war" is "the first to bring home a human head in Umuofia's latest war" (8,10).

Anyone who knew Okonkwo's struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved his success, that man was Okonkwo. At an early age he had achieved fame as the greatest wrestler in all the land. That was not luck. "At the most one could say that his 'chi' or personal god was good. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his chi says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his chi agreed" (27).

Okonkwo seeks to choose a path that deviates as much as possible from his father's "contemptible life and shameful death" (18). By Okonkwo's standards and indeed by the traditional standards of the tribe, Unoka, his father, is an embarrassing "failure" (5): a "lazy and improvident" debtor who cannot properly feed his wife and children, a "loafer" who becomes a village laughing-stock, a "coward" who cannot "bear the sight of blood" (5-6). Unoka is even called "agbala"- a title less man but also a

woman by one of Okonkwo's childhood friends, which highlights the patriarchal nature of Igbo society, in which demonstrated "manliness" was privileged (66). Okonkwo's whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness", a fear that "he should be found to resemble his father. Thus Okonkwo is "ruled by one passion: to hate everything his father Unoka had loved" (13).

As Okonkwo succeeds in life, the seeds of his tragic fall are ironically sown in the very making of his triumph. The rigidity of Okonkwo's "masculine marital values" is frequently noted in the novel. As Abdul R. Jan Mohamed puts it, however much the novel lauds his "pride, courage and diligence", Okonkwo ultimately comes across as an "inflexible, calcified monomaniac" (Jan Mohamed 181).

Thus, although *Things Fall Apart* celebrates Okonkwo's traditionalism and resistance to British colonialism- his commitment to doing things in "the grand, old way" (166) - the novel also questions his obsession with "masculine" values and his lack of tolerance and flexibility generally.

As critical as the novel is of Okonkwo's complicity in the killing of Ikemefuna, however, he is only punished by Umuofia when he accidentally kills the sixteen years old son of a titled man of the village during his father's funeral. Okonkwo's goal of becoming "one of the lords of the clan" (131) and of remaining among "the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan" (171) is irreparably compromised by his being "condemned for seven years to live in a strange land" (133). Okonkwo's downfall and eventual banishment from the tribe in the end proceeds from the offences committed, 'against the earth goddess.' Okonkwo's exile from Umuofia is used in the text to delineate

the changes that will come by the time Okonkwo returns to see his world collapsed and disintegrated.

When Okonkwo is exiled from Umuofia, he goes to live in his mother's village. He is depressed about this, until he is reminded by his relative Uchendu that his mother like all women is buried here with her own kinsfolk as is the custom. The narrative is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured. The conflict between two cultures begins with the arrival of Missionaries and the main source of conflict is religion as it is the most important determining factor in the society. The Christian religion runs into conflict with the traditional culture and it becomes evident when Okonkwo returns to Umuofia. He finds that white Missionaries have begun to educate the natives about the falsity of their own gods and religion. They told them that the gods they worshipped were false gods, gods of wood and stone.

Their speeches captivated many free born young lads including Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, who had been lured by their talk and became a convert. When the free born who joined the church started mixing freely with the outcasts who formed the bulk of converts in those days, it was considered by their elders as contrary to their tradition and they said, 'The Church had come and led many astray. Not only the low born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it' (123). This reference was to Ogbuefi Ugonna who being a titled man and well respected in the village, 'had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians' (123).

Indeed, colonization is represented in the novel as beginning with the arrival of

Missionaries and ending with a more obviously political and economic agenda. Even without this economic and political dimension, however, the Missionaries appear to threaten the tribe's very existence. Okonkwo views the rise of Anglicanism and the death of Igbo culture as happening at the same time. At numerous points Achebe's novel even associates the arrival of the Anglicans with the "death" of the clan and the massacre of the Africans. *Things Fall Apart* reveals the great extent to which religious Missionaries were part of a comprehensive strategy of colonization, in which the church functioned as the foundation for political and economic imperialism.

At countless other points in the novel, it is made clear that "the white man had not only brought a religion but a government" (155); that were inseparable from one another, that "the new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds" (182-83). Paradoxically, the "imagined process of 'civilization' that the British believed they were giving to the savages" is revealed in *Things Fall Apart* which leads to cultural disintegration and social chaos- the breakdown of Igbo society.

Okonkwo and the leaders of Umuofia were not ready to tolerate it and wanted Umuofia to mould in the traditional image and they decided to contest the church, government and religion of

Missionaries. As a consequence, he has to stay in prison and is humiliated. But when the very existence and dignity of the tribe is threatened, he is ready for war and continues to resist,

Throughout the rapid changes that occur in the last part of the novel, Okonkwo is grieved but powerless. He is a symbol of resistance but the forces of change are more powerful than the native resistance. Being powerless, Okonkwo commits suicide, who is not only the main character in the novel, but is also a symbol of the old order. He symbolizes traditional values as hunting, farming, respect and worship of ancestors and gods. Okonkwo will not submit to the brutalisation by the colonizer and the destruction of old values. His death shows that things have indeed fallen apart when the might of the white man triumphs. His act of hanging himself is the final one of despair. The old society dies with Okonkwo, but it is not a natural death; it kills itself as Okonkwo does. The difference however is that Okonkwo's suicide is necessitated by the collective suicide of the people of Umuofia when they refuse to fight. Both the new religion and the colonial administration acting together have subdued the Igbo people. The society surrenders itself through submission to the white man, whereas Okonkwo kills himself because he sees this submission as a sign of moral collapse, and because he himself will not submit, he cannot live any longer.

References

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