

POTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS: A STUDY OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958), certain key aspects of the novel's meaning remain unresolved. At the heart of the problem lies the question of how to interpret the reasons for Okonkwo's downfall or fate. The article suggests that a number of different sources of explanation appear to be plausible at various levels, but it goes on to demonstrate that at least some of these putative explanations are incompatible if not mutually exclusive. The more general difficulty arising from this is that several of these explanations are underpinned by worldviews which differ from and even conflict with each other. The article intends, therefore, through an exploration of the possible reasons for Okonkwo's demise, to consider what worldview the novel finally supports and, indeed, whether the novel's outlook is coherent at all. The chief conclusion is that although the overall perspective of the novel is highly complex, it does not necessarily follow that the actual meaning of the novel itself is either illogical or self contradictory

Keywords: *Nigeria, culture, colonial, impact, movement, tradition.*

Introduction

Chinua Achebe was received an early education in English, but grew up surrounded by a complex fusion of Igbo traditions and colonial legacy. Born Albert Chinualumogo Achebe, Chinua Achebe was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igbo land, Eastern Nigeria. He received an early education in English, but grew up surrounded by a complex fusion of Igbo traditions and colonial legacy. Born Albert Chinualumogo Achebe, Chinua Achebe was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igbo land, Eastern Nigeria. He received an early education in English, but grew up surrounded by a complex fusion of Igbo traditions and colonial legacy. Chinua Achebe's college work sharpened his interest in indigenous Nigerian cultures. He had grown up in Ogidi, a large village in Nigeria. His father taught at the missionary school, and Achebe witnessed firsthand the complex mix of benefit and

catastrophe that the Christian religion had brought to the Igbo people. In the 1950s, an exciting new literary movement grew in strength. Drawing on indigenous Nigerian oral traditions, this movement enriched European literary forms in hopes of creating a new literature, in English but unmistakably African. Published in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* is one of the masterpieces of 20th century African fiction. *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s, during the coming of the white man to Nigeria. In part, the novel is a response and antidote to a large tradition of European literature in which Africans are depicted as primitive and mindless savages. The attitudes present in colonial literature are so ingrained into our perception of Africa that the District Commissioner, who appears at the end of the novel, strikes a chord of familiarity with most readers. He is arrogant, dismissive of African "savages," and totally ignorant of the complexity and richness of Igbo life. Yet his attitude echoes so much of the depiction of Africa; this attitude, following Achebe's depiction of the Igbo, seems hollow and savage.

Digression is one of Achebe's most important tools. Although the novel's central story is the tragedy of Okonkwo, Achebe takes any opportunity he can to digress and relate anecdotes and tertiary incidents. The novel is part documentary, but the liveliness of Achebe's narrative protects the book from reading like an anthropology text. We are allowed to see the Igbo through their own eyes, as they celebrate the various rituals and holidays that mark important moments in the year and in the people's life.

Achebe depicts the Igbo as a people with great social institutions. Their culture is rich and impressively civilized, with traditions and laws that place great emphasis on justice and fairness. The people are ruled not by a king or chief but by a kind of simple democracy, in which all males gather and make decisions by consensus. Ironically, it is the Europeans, who often boast of bringing democratic institutions to the rest of the world, who try to suppress these clan meetings in Umuofia. The Igbo also boast a high degree of social mobility. Men are not judged by the wealth of their fathers, and Achebe emphasizes that high rank is attainable for all freeborn Igbo. He does not shy from depicting the injustices of Igbo society. No more or less than Victorian England of the same era, the Igbo are deeply patriarchal. They also have a great fear of twins, who are abandoned immediately after birth to a death by exposure. Violence is not unknown to them, although warfare on a European scale is something of which they have no comprehension. The novel attempts to repair some of the damage done by earlier European depictions of Africans. But this recuperation must necessarily come in the form of memory; by the time Achebe was born, the coming of the white man had already destroyed many aspects of indigenous culture.

Discussion

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The bulk of the novel takes place in Umuofia, a cluster of nine villages on the lower Niger. Umuofia is a powerful clan, skilled in war and with a great population, with proud

traditions and advanced social institutions. Okonkwo has risen from nothing to a high position. Through hard work, he has become a great man among his people. He has taken three wives and his barn is full of yams, the staple crop. He rules his family with an iron fist. One day, a neighboring clan commits an offense against Umuofia. To avoid war, the offending clan gives Umuofia one virgin and one young boy. The girl is to become the offended party's new wife. The boy, whose name is Ikemefuna, is to be sacrificed, but not immediately. He lives in Umuofia for three years, and during that time he lives under Okonkwo's roof. He becomes like a part of Okonkwo's family. In particular, Nwoye, Okonkwo's oldest son, loves Ikemefuna like a brother. But eventually the Oracle calls for the boy's death, and a group of men take Ikemefuna away to kill him in the forest. Okonkwo, fearful of being perceived as soft-hearted and weak, participates in the boy's death. He does so despite the advice of the clan elders. Nwoye is spiritually broken by the event.

Okonkwo is shaken as well, but he continues with his drive to become a lord of his clan. He is constantly disappointed by Nwoye, but he has great love for his daughter Ezinma, his child by his second wife Ekwefi. Ekwefi has born ten children, but only Ezinma has survived. She loves the girl fiercely. Ezinma is sickly, and sometimes Ekwefi fears that Ezinma, too, will die. Late one night, the powerful Oracle of Umuofia brings Ezinma with her for a spiritual encounter with the earth goddess. Terrified, Ekwefi follows the Oracle at a distance, fearing harm might come to her child. Okonkwo follows, too. Later, during a funeral for one of the great men of the clan, Okonkwo's gun explodes, killing a boy. In accordance with Umuofia's law, Okonkwo and his family must be exiled for seven years. Okonkwo bears the exile bitterly. Central to his beliefs is faith that a man masters his own destiny. But the accident and exile are proof that at times man cannot control his own fate, and Okonkwo is forced to start over again without the strength and energy of his youth. He flees with his family to Mbanto, his mother's homeland. There they are received by his mother's family, who treat them generously. His mother's family is headed by Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle, a generous and wise old man.

During Okonkwo's exile, the white man comes to both Umuofia and Mbanto. The missionaries arrive first, preaching a religion that seems mad to the Igbo people. They win converts, but generally the converts are men of low rank or outcasts. However, with time, the new religion gains momentum. Nwoye becomes a convert. When Okonkwo learns of Nwoye's conversion, he beats the boy. Nwoye leaves home. Okonkwo returns to Umuofia to find the clan sadly changed. The church has won some converts, some of whom are fanatical and disrespectful of clan custom. Worse, the white man's government has come to Umuofia. The clan is no longer free to judge its own; a District Commissioner judges cases in ignorance. He is backed by armed power. During a religious gathering, a convert unmasks one of the clan spirits. The offense is grave, and in response the clan decides that the church will no longer be allowed in

Umuofia. They tear the building down. Soon afterward, the District Commissioner asks the leaders of the clan, Okonkwo among them, to come see him for a peaceful meeting. The leaders arrive, and are quickly seized. In prison, they are humiliated and beaten, and they are held until the clan pays a heavy fine.

After a release of the men, the clan calls a meeting to decide whether they will fight or try to live peacefully with the whites. Okonkwo wants war. During the meeting, court messengers come to order the men to break up their gathering. The clan meetings are the heart of Umuofia's government; all decisions are reached democratically, and an interference with this institution means the end of the last vestiges of Umuofia's independence. Enraged, Okonkwo kills the court messenger. The other court messengers escape, and because the other people of his clan did not seize them, Okonkwo knows that his people will not choose war. His act of resistance will not be followed by others. Embittered and grieving for the destruction of his people's independence, and fearing the humiliation of dying under white law, Okonkwo returns home and hangs himself.

Portrayal of Characters

Okonkwo

Proud, ambitious, and ill-tempered, Okonkwo is the tragic hero of *Things Fall Apart*. An ambitious man who has risen from nothing to a man of importance in his tribe, Okonkwo rules his family with an iron fist. He is deeply dedicated to the traditions and social hierarchies of his people, and he is determined that his sons and daughters follow his demanding example. The indignities forced on him and his people by the British eventually prove to be too much for him. After an act of defiance which goes unsupported by his people, Okonkwo gives in to despair. He kills himself, partly so that he will not be executed under the white man's laws and partly because he is grieving for the death of his people.

Unoka

Okonkwo's father. He died when Okonkwo was very young, and he was a failure. Shame for Unoka drives Okonkwo to work tirelessly. Unoka died in debt and humiliation; the memory of him gives Okonkwo a terrible fear of failure.

Ikemefuna

A young boy given to Umuofia by a neighboring village as tribute. Ikemefuna is sacrificed to prevent a war. He lives in Umuofia for three years, under Okonkwo's roof; Okonkwo looks at him as a son, and to Nwoye he becomes best friend and brother. He is killed by the tribe; out of fear that otherwise people will think him weak, Okonkwo participates in the boy's death.

Nwoye

Okonkwo's son. Nwoye is sensitive and thoughtful, but he is also somewhat lazy and sulky. Okonkwo is harsh with the boy, fearing that he will become like Unoka. After the

death of Ikemefuna, something breaks in Nwoye. Later, he converts to Christianity, in part to escape his father. His betrayal embitters and outrages Okonkwo.

Ogbuefi Ezeudu

One of the oldest men in Umuofia. He warns Okonkwo not to participate in Ikemefuna's death. Later, at Ezeudu's funeral, Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills a boy, which leads to Okonkwo's exile

Nwoye's mother

Never named, Nwoye's mother is Okonkwo's first wife. She is a generous woman, and she has been fortunate in the number of children she has had.

Ojiugo

Okonkwo's third and youngest wife. Okonkwo beats her savagely during the Week of Peace, and must pay a heavy fine to the earth goddess.

Ekwefi

Okonkwo's second wife. In her youth, she was one of the great beauties of Umuofia. She has had ten children, but only one has survived. She is a formidable and brave woman, devoted to her surviving daughter, Ezinma.

Ezinma

Clever and brave, Ezinma starts as a precocious but sickly child. She is Okonkwo's favorite daughter, and seems to understand his moods. His attitude toward her shows the more tender side of his character. She grows into a beautiful and strong young woman.

Obierika

Okonkwo's great friend, and another prosperous and powerful man in the tribe. Obierika is also thoughtful. He is less misogynistic than Okonkwo, and he has no love for unnecessary violence. He is a compassionate and just man.

Chielo/ Priestess of Agbala (Oracle of the Hills and the Caves)

In normal life, Chielo is a widow and an ordinary woman. But she is also the Priestess of Agbala, and when the power of prophecy comes to her she is possessed by the godhead. She is one of the most powerful figures of the clan; now important decision can be made without her approval.

Okagbue, the Medicine Man

The Medicine Man helps Ekwefi to try and make Ezinma "stay." They fear that she will die like the earlier children, but the Medicine Man succeeds in finding the supernatural cause of her sickliness.

Uchendu

Okonkwo's uncle. Elderly and wise, Uchendu is an impressive but gentle patriarch. Even Okonkwo submits to his authority.

Akwiku

Okonkwo's cousin. He informs Okonkwo that Nwoye is among the Christians.

Mr. Kiaga

A Christian African, Mr. Kiaga heads the congregation in Mbanto. He is a gentle and wise man, full of unshakeable faith.

Mr. Brown

A white man and missionary. He strives to compromise with the clan; though he is determined to win converts, he restrains the excessive and violent zeal of some of the converts. He eventually falls ill due to overwork.

Mr. Smith

Mr. Brown's replacement. Mr. Smith is neither wise nor compromising. Under him, the fanatics flourish. His foolishness brings the Christians of Umuofia into direct conflict with the clan.

He studied literature and medicine at the University of Ibadan; after graduating, he went to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos and later studied at the British Broadcasting Corporation staff school in London. During this time, Achebe was developing work as a writer. Starting in the 1950s, he was central to a new Nigerian literary movement that drew on the oral traditions of Nigeria's indigenous tribes. Although Achebe wrote in English, he attempted to incorporate Igbo vocabulary and narratives. Achebe left his career in radio in 1966, during the national unrest and violence that led to the Biafran War. He narrowly escaped harm at the hands of soldiers who believed that his novel, *A Man of the People*, implicated him in the country's first military coup. He began an academic career the next year, taking a position as a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Nigeria. That same year, he co-founded a publishing company with Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. In 1971, he became an editor for *Okike*, a prestigious Nigerian literary magazine. In 1984, he founded *Iwa ndi Ibo*, a bilingual publication dedicated to Igbo cultural life.

Achebe's university career was extremely successful: he was made Emeritus Professor at the University of Nigeria in 1985; he taught at the University of Massachusetts and the University of Connecticut; and he received over twenty honorary doctorates from universities around the world. Achebe became active in Nigerian politics in the 1960s. Many of his novels dealt with the social and political problems facing his country, including the difficulties of the post-colonial legacy. When Biafra, an Eastern region in Nigeria, declared independence in 1967, Achebe put aside writing long fiction in order to spend thirty months traveling Europe and the United States advocating for the new country. During this period, he produced several short stories dealing with the complex realities of the Nigerian Civil War; the best known of these stories is "Civil Peace". Several decades later, in 1994, Achebe was forced to flee Nigeria after the repressive regime threatened to imprison him for his political stances and activism. Achebe was married and had four children. He last lived in the United States, where he held a teaching position at Bard College until 2009, when he joined Brown University as a professor of Africana Studies.

Conclusion

In the light of the evidence considered so far, is it possible to decide which of the competing worldviews (or *Weltbilder*), if any, the novel finally supports? On the one hand, many elements in the novel seem to suggest a worldview which is coherent and unified, within which Okonkwo's fate may be seen as part of a general dispensation of justice in the universe. As Achebe himself has noted (1975:165), the Igbo believe that...when a man's misfortune is somehow beyond explanation [it] can only be attributable to an agreement he himself must have entered into, at the beginning, alone with his *chi*; for there is a fundamental justice in the universe and nothing so terrible can happen to a person for which he is not somehow responsible. However, there are other factors in the novel which seem to militate against interpreting Okonkwo's fate in terms of such an ordered and purposeful outlook. It may be argued that Okonkwo's demise has nothing to do with justice or morality at all, but is simply the product of chance, of the arbitrary events of a universe which is ultimately meaningless and absurd. From a purely material perspective, he may be regarded as a victim of the accidents of history, an inconsequential statistic in the vast transcultural drama of colonisation. Or his end might be ascribed to a random causal amalgam of social conditioning and psychological determinism. In all these accounts, however, Okonkwo's fate appears less the disbursement of divine justice and more the result merely of the chance occurrences of human existence. It is perhaps necessary to conclude, therefore, that the novel does not support one worldview at the expense of the other, but that at least two potentially valid cosmological orientations are coterminously present in the text. That is, the novel presents, at the same time, *both* a traditional Igbo religio-cultural perspective which asserts that the universal order is fundamentally just and meaningful, *and* a modern, scientific outlook which regards the universe as ultimately neutral in matters of individual human destiny. It is, moreover, the contention of this article that this apparent self-contradiction is not necessarily destructive of the novel's ends.

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