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► **To cite this version:**

Etsè Awitor. Individuality in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958): the Case of Okonkwo. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2013, *Side Views*, 37, pp.52-62. hal-02340771

HAL Id: hal-02340771

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02340771v1>

Submitted on 31 Oct 2019

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Individuality in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958): the Case of Okonkwo

Until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter.
(Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile*)

Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has been highly acclaimed and has received much criticism. James Olney in his book, *Tell Me Africa*, finds in the protagonist Okonkwo "the generalized portrait of a man whose character is deliberately and significantly without individualizing traits." (167) He goes further to conclude, "thus one must read Okonkwo's fate, he being representative and typical, as nothing less than the symbolic fate of the traditional Ibo society with the advent of the white man." (171) Likewise, in his *An Introduction to the African Novel*, Eustace Palmer argues that "Okonkwo is the personification of his society's values." (53) Thus, "if he is plagued by fear of failure and of weakness it is because his society put such a premium on success." (53) Douglas Killam, another critic, in *The Novels of Chinua Achebe*, presents a similar interpretation of Okonkwo, when he overemphasises how Okonkwo embodies the fundamental values of his society. "Okonkwo was one of the greatest men of his time, the embodiment of Ibo values, the man who better than most symbolizes his race." (16)

It is clear that these critics read *Things Fall Apart* from a Western perspective, view the protagonists of post-colonial literature as "national allegories" and judge any literary work according to Eurocentric universalism. While James Olney and Douglas Killam were Northern expatriates, Eustace Palmer (a renowned Sierra Leonian professor of African literature) was trained in, and writes from, a colonial and Eurocentric system of literary studies. They see Igbo society as "homogeneous where the people are anonymous masses, rather than individuals, their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions." (Barry 193-94) They see Okonkwo as the epitome and the embodiment of his society's values; hence, his downfall is the disintegration of Igbo society and its beliefs. Eustace Palmer goes further to present Okonkwo as a victim of his society: "Okonkwo is what his society has made him, for his most conspicuous qualities are responses to the demands of his society" (53).

One may be tempted to say that Okonkwo's actions and behaviour are dictated by his environment and, therefore, he is not in any way responsible for his deeds. In a word, these critics fail to see the protagonist as an individual character whose "fear" of failure and his unremitting quest for self-realisation have deprived him of common sense and humanity. Although Okonkwo can stand for certain values (courage, wealth and valour) praised by his society, he fails to acknowledge other positive qualities (compassion, love and sensitivity) cherished by his people and which he regards as marks of weakness.

My purpose in this essay is to analyse the place of Okonkwo within his community (as one of the lords of the clan and as an individual with his strength and weakness), to find out to what extent he can stand for the values defended by Igbo people and to see how the traditional Igbo society is organised. Achebe's warning that Western critics of African literature "must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the African world and be purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to" (9) is justified when we read various criticisms on *Things Fall Apart*.

Edward Said, in his *Orientalism*, writes about Eurocentric universalism which portrays everything related to West or Europe as superior, and inferior what is not. Edward Said says that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." (236) Western colonists have depicted the "Other" (non-European) as blank spaces, lands without narrative, history, waiting to enter history. It is clear that

much of the discourse of orientalism has been partial and prejudiced and often condescending.[...] Much, too, reveals a certain arrogance and sense of superiority—a "we know best" attitude—on the part of the West towards the East. Much of it is marred by racism, naivety, presumption and plain arrogance, and there are often facile generalization by people who should know better (eg. Ernest Renan, T. E. Lawrence) as in vague statements about "the Arab mind," "the Asian sensibility," "the Semitic temperament." (Cuddon 622)

It is worth mentioning that Achebe wrote the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, in response to the demeaning and unpleasant depictions of Africans in novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and he "has made clear that his principal purpose in the book was to give African readers a realistic depiction of their pre-colonial

past, free of the distortions and stereotypes imposed in European accounts” (Booker 65).

Achebe’s commitment echoes Frantz Fanon’s “cultural resistance” to the French African empire voiced in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, published in French in 1961. According to Fanon, the “colonised” must claim their own past in order to find a voice and an identity, and erode the colonialist ideology by which that past had been distorted or devalued. Hence, a close analysis of *Things Fall Apart* would help understand the pre-colonial Igbo society and show that Okonkwo is neither the “representative,” the “type” of Igbo society or its victim as Olney, Palmer and Killam have claimed.

Okonkwo plays an important role in Igbo society before the penetration of the European missionaries. There is no doubt that Achebe would like to lay the emphasis on the main protagonist’s greatness when the novel opens. In fact, from the very first lines, the reader is aware of the greatness, the valour and the courage of Okonkwo. Moreover, his physical and moral characteristics are depicted to enable the reader to fully grasp the personality of Okonkwo:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the greatest wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino [...]. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan...When he walked, his heel hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father. (3)

In the light of this quotation, we can see that Okonkwo is “clearly cut out for great things” and that he has won his reputation as a warrior and wrestler thus becoming “one of the lords of the clan,” *i.e.* a respected man in Umuofia. Okonkwo not only occupies a high position among his people but also identifies with their ancestors. Okonkwo goes further to play the role of the ancestors to “administer justice” in his clan. He was one of the *egwugwu* (a masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village) trying to settle Uzowulu and Mgbafo’s marital dispute:

Okonkwo's wives and perhaps other women as well, might have noticed that the second *egwugwu* had the springy walk of Okonkwo. And they might also have noticed that Okonkwo was not among the titled men and elders who sat behind the row of *egwugwu* [...]. The *egwugwu* with the springy walk was one of the dead fathers of the clan. (64)

It is Okonkwo's achievement that has enabled him to take part actively in his society: "age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered" and as the Igbo proverb puts it, "if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (6). Thus Okonkwo, due to his achievements, is eating with kings and elders. Needless to say Okonkwo has achieved fame, success and wealth; but does not his relentless struggle to gain social status hide a certain malaise?

Okonkwo's main motivation is his determination to succeed where his father, Unoka, has failed. Unoka is depicted as *agbala*—lazy, a woman or a man without titles. "[I]n his days he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. [...] Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amount" (3-4) and when he died, "he had taken no title at all" (6). Unlike Okonkwo, "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (5). Okonkwo stands in direct contrast to his father and he is perpetually driven by fear of failure. This and his weakness have governed and dictated all Okonkwo's actions:

[Okonkwo's] whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala*. [...] And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion- to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (10-11)

Okonkwo's fear of failure and weakness, presumably, have been the causes of his tragic downfall. For him, strength is the only thing that a man should show. It is not surprising that Okonkwo rules his household "with heavy hand" and beats his wives. Ojiugo, the youngest wife, was beaten during the Week of Peace and this situation led Okonkwo to commit the *nso- ani*

(a religious offence of a kind abhorred by everyone). And in order to appease *Ani*, the earth goddess, Okonkwo is obliged to accomplish a sacrifice. This is the first offence Okonkwo committed against *Ani*, and Ezeani (the priest of earth goddess) told him that “the evil [he] ha[s] done can ruin the whole clan.” (22) The same remark was made by Obierika after Okonkwo had killed Ikemefuna: “What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out the whole families.” (46)

Ikemefuna is placed in Okonkwo's household and he has lived there for three years and has become like Okonkwo's own son. He gets along very well with Nwoye and calls Okonkwo his father. Okonkwo also becomes fond of him but never shows it openly. The Oracle decides that Ikemefuna must be killed and Ezeudu Ogbuefi, the oldest man in the clan, warns Okonkwo not to take part in his killing. But haunted by the fear of appearing weak and cowardly, Okonkwo cuts him down with his machet. “Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak” (43).

The killing of Ikemefuna is the second crime committed against the earth goddess by Okonkwo. Had he listened to Ezeudu's warning, he could have avoided this crime. “That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death” (40). Ironically, it is during the burial ceremony of Ezeudu that Okonkwo inadvertently kills a “clansman” (Ezeudu's son). It is his third crime against the earth goddess. It is worth mentioning that it is with the same gun that Okonkwo nearly kills his wife, Ekwefi, during the New Yam Festival. The killing of a clansman is heavily punished by the clan, and the only way to expiate his crime is to flee from it.

Okonkwo seeks refuge with his family in his motherland, Mbanta. We have here in mind Ezeani and Obierika's voice which now sounds like a prophetic voice when they told Okonkwo that what he had done could bring evil on the entire family and even on the clan. His banishment from the clan and the loss of his wealth and prominence is the beginning of his downfall. He who, all his life, has striven to secure a place of high position in his clan, must start a new life and wait for seven years to come back to Umuofia. In his exile, he questioned for the first time if he has been made for great things. “Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*. The saying of the elders was not true—that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here he was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation.” (92) In his despair and trouble, he cannot even turn to his son, Nwoye, for solace.

Okonkwo's fear that Nwoye cannot take after him is clearly expressed early in the novel. Okonkwo does not hesitate to compare him to his grandfather, Unoka, whom he despises. When talking about Nwoye's unmanliness, Okonkwo said that "a bowl of pounded yams can throw him in a wrestling match" (46) and he wished his daughter, Ezimma, had been a boy. Nwoye's weakness and his laziness have been a source of great anxiety for Okonkwo, because he wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man. Okonkwo cannot think that his son would not be able to play an important role in the clan: "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I will sooner strangle him with my own hands" (24). And Nwoye is not the person who wants to "hold up his head" in society, at least, not in the society which his father stands for. Nwoye is troubled by the killing of Ikemefuna, the twins crying in the evil forest, and he questions the values of his society. The new dispensation seems to seduce him even if he does not fully understand it:

there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it [...]. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul.[...] Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (104)

Nwoye has chosen to join the new religion in order to protest against his father's attitudes and certain values of his society. Ironically enough, Nwoye does not want to resemble his father because of his recklessness, tactlessness, and harshness. Despite Okonkwo's success, Nwoye prefers to join the missionaries. It is worth noting that Okonkwo despises his father, Unoka, for his failure and weakness and fails to notice the generosity and humanity that the latter has.

Even though Unoka is considered as *agbala*, and his wives and children have barely enough to eat, the reader is aware of his positive qualities of sensitivity, love, compassion and humour:

If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace. [...] Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship, and he loved this season of the

year, when the rains had stopped and the sun rose every morning with dazzling beauty. (3, 4)

Unlike Okonkwo, Unoka is at peace with himself, with others and of course with nature. He plays in a band and entertains people. He is both an actor and musician. His music procures him a lot of pleasure and he is not engaged in a race for materialism and prestige.

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia seven years later, the missionaries have settled a new religion and new administration and have won new converts. Even some titled men have joined the new dispensation. Okonkwo's efforts to regain his place as one of the lords in his clan have been shattered by the transformation and metamorphosis which have taken place. His intention to wipe out, by all means, the missionaries does not receive the approval of the clan. "There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia." (126)

It is clear that Umuofians cannot act as one people like in the past, even if the clan is under a threat; Okonkwo regrets "the good old days, when a warrior was a warrior" and adds sadly that "worthy men are no more." So, he decides to fight alone if necessary to take his revenge (on the humiliation six leaders including himself have received from the District Commissioner). It is during the gathering of Umuofians to decide about the actions to take against the threat of the new dispensation that Okonkwo slaughtered one of the messengers who are sent to stop the meeting. "The white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop. In a flash Okonkwo drew his matchet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's matchet descended twice and the man's head lay beside his unformed body." (144)

Okonkwo, once again, has shown his manliness in front of the clan as refuses to admit that his clan can no longer act like one and that it is falling apart. But soon, he realises that "Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. [...] He heard voice asking: 'Why did he do it?' (145) Okonkwo, disappointed by the reaction of the clan and in order to avoid being humiliated, has taken his own life. By committing suicide, Okonkwo committed an abomination which deprives him of a decent funeral. He is buried like a dog.

Okonkwo's tragic downfall is a personal and individual one rather than that of the Igbo society. As I said earlier, Okonkwo is haunted by his fear of failure and he takes every opportunity to show his success, his manliness. He fails to see any merit in kindness, love, compassion and generosity. Also, he fails to understand the society whose values he pretends to embody. Hence, it is not surprising that he commits a series of offences that prepare his tragic downfall: the beating of Ojuigo during the Week of Peace; the killing of Ikemefuna; the shooting at Ekwefi; the destruction of Nwoye's personality and his contempt for his father. If Okonkwo had been a typical Igbo man, his example would have been followed by other Umuofians. The questions that need to be asked are why do Obierika, Ndulue and Ezeudu, who are also great men of the clan, not behave like Okonkwo? Why did the clan let the other messengers escape? How could Okonkwo achieve perennial fame when he always took an extremist position and failed to notice that his society is both rigid and flexible? Okonkwo whose demise I analyse arises from his lack of full understanding of his people, culture and society. But then, how does Achebe present Igbo pre-colonial society?

The Igbo society described by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* is governed by a complicated system of traditions and customs. The Umuofians are proud of their stable society and they do not question the laws that govern it. The society has its own legal, educational, religious and hierarchical system. From birth to death, they obey the legacy of their ancestors, which serves as a guideline and reference. Through the depiction of everyday life, Achebe has succeeded in presenting the social context of the traditional Igbo society.

The rituals are omnipresent in the novel. The ritual of breaking the kola nut or drinking palm wine, for instance, reveals the custom of every day life. The breaking and acceptance of kola nut symbolises a peaceful welcome, whereas its refusal implies that there is an important matter or disagreement to settle. We have here in mind the ritual ceremony when Okonkwo brought a cock and a pot of palm-wine to Nwakabie to ask for favour:

He [Nwakabie] presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which was passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke it, saying: 'We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. (14)

The organisation of the society is centred on activities related to the seasons; hence, the planting season, the harvest, and the New Yam Festival are

crowned with wrestling contests. Justice is administered by the masked spirits or *egwugwu* (to settle, for instance, the marital dispute between Uzowulu and Odukwe), and there are many deities which protect society as their decisions are irrevocable. The Igbo society makes sure that everything that seems to threaten its security and might bring the wrath of the gods is expelled from its midst.

Okonkwo is obliged to flee from the clan to expiate his crime, the same way twins and people suffering from swelling sickness (Unoka, for example) are abandoned in the dangerous forest and *ogbanjes* are mutilated and dragged on the floor. The *Osu* is a taboo, and is not allowed to mix with the freeborn, and suicide is considered as an abomination.

Achebe has tried to present Igbo life with its flaws and with its values. He does not show us the idealized Igbo pre-colonial society but he lets everybody judge that life as well as the life which replaces it. We are told that Obierika is “a man who thought about things” and through him, Achebe questions the validity of certain laws of the Igbo society: “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time, he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?” (87)

One of the preoccupations of post-colonial criticism is the language used by the post colonial writers. Some of them said that “the coloniser’s language is permanently tainted, and that to write in it involves a crucial acquiescence in colonial structures” (Barry 195). We cannot talk about *Things Fall Apart*, without talking about the way Achebe handles the English language. The novel is fraught with Igbo idioms, Igbo words and folktales. According to Lindfors Bernth, the use of these features gives the novel an “air of historical authenticity”(48). For example, let’s consider sentences such as “Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan” (3); “Ikemefuna grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life” (37). The Igbo words, “Agbala,” “ogene,” “chi,” “nza” and “obi” can be understood even by non-Igbo reader. Also, throughout the novel, the characters use proverbs to open or close their speeches or to drive their points home because “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (5). Here are a few proverbs that are used in the novel: “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into his palm.”(47); “If one finger brought oil it soils the others” (87). “Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life” (187).

Things Fall Apart is a tragedy of one man, driven by a blind passion. His obsession to show his success and his manliness, by all means, has dehumanised him in such a way that he has committed a series of offences against the laws of the clan. His suicide has definitively cast him out of the clan, because his people cannot touch him. According to Gerald Moore, “Okonkwo is more like a super-Igbo; an exaggeration of certain qualities admired by his people, but at the expense of others which the rounded man is expected to possess” (127). Although we acknowledge that he stands for a certain values praised by his people, his tragic downfall cannot be linked to the pre-colonial disintegration. His downfall begins before the arrival of the missionaries. The missionaries have won new converts and have established their religion because of the flaws and the weakness of Igbo society itself. It is worth mentioning that most of the new converts are outcasts, twins’ mothers, *osu* and *efulefu* who find solace in the new religion. Also, the contact of Igbo society with the Western (two societies which misunderstand each other) will lead inevitably to the disintegration of one; here the Igbo society. This disintegration is an illustration of Frantz Fanon’s observation that “the colonial world is a Manichean world”(41).

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