



Captivated between two incompatible worlds: The impact of Colonialism on Okonkwo

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Abstract:

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Colonialism as “the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically”. Africa in its phase of colonization saw major changes in culture, polity and people. The roots that held Africa together became shackles. The ramifications were severe: unity dissolved, selfishness poured in, cowardice ruled, and things fell apart. After the European encroachment, Africa became what it was not once. Chinua Achebe, in his book *Things Fall Apart* (1958), touches all these aspects.

Keywords: Colonialism, society, warriors, survive, culture, *ancestors*.

Things Fall Apart (1958) is the first book of Chinua Achebe’s African trilogy, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) being the other two. Achebe portrays the rich culture of Igbo tribe, the imposition of European culture and its aftermath on Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo’s inflexible will towards change is the reason for his tragic downfall and death.

Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is set in late 1800s, the time when Europe wanted to include Africa as one among its colonial empires. The novel is divided into three parts with twenty five chapters and the story takes place in Umuofia and Mbanta , two fictional villages in Nigeria. Through this novel Achebe introduces the Igbo society’s cultural and political structures, traditions, law, role of men and women in the family and society.



Achebe is objective in showcasing the fallacies of certain Igbo traditions; at the same time he is very downright in expressing how colonization psychologically haunts the Africans and how it breaks them as brothers who fail to resist the oppression of the imperialists.

Though colonialism has its effects on the Igbo community, the crisis faced by Okonkwo is more personal than communal. The tragic flaw of Okonkwo is his inflexible will towards change. This rigid nature of not accepting any sort of transformation makes Okonkwo unfit to live in two incompatible worlds: the traditional Igbo society and the colonized Igbo society. He neither follows Igbo traditions as they are, nor accepts the changes brought by the colonizers.

The novel opens in Umuofia, Okonkwo's fatherland in the lower Nigeria. Okonkwo is one of the respectable warriors of the Umuofia clan, who always carries a haggard look on his face and has no patience with unsuccessful men, especially his father Unoka. He never wants to be like his father as the Igbo society reveres only hard working men and calls the lazy men *agbala*, meaning woman.

“Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered”. (TFA, p. 6)

To avoid this, Okonkwo wants to become everything his father wasn't and achieve the highest title in his clan. He is one among the nine masked men, the *egwugwu*, who preserve justice in Umuofia.

The quest for identity begins in Okonkwo when his playmate calls Unoka an *agbala*. Since then Okonkwo resents everything his father loves. As Okonkwo didn't inherit either a farm or a barn from his father, he takes the help of Nwakibie and borrows few yam seeds. Initial two years make it difficult for Okonkwo with no rains at all and then a heavy downpour. But a fierce fighter like Okonkwo faces it with strong will. He says that he shall survive anything after facing such drought and downpour.



“Since I survived that year,’ he always said, ‘I shall survive anything’”. (p.18)

Sadly, it is the white man from whom Okonkwo couldn't survive.

By the time Okonkwo reaches his prime, he becomes a great warrior and a wealthy farmer with three wives and nine children. He brings his fifth human head home from war. Okonkwo, a warrior with two titles, as an emissary of Umuofia brings a young virgin and a young boy, Ikemefuna from Mbaino as compensation to the murder of an Umuofia woman. The clan entrusts Ikemefuna's responsibility to Okonkwo. Ikemefuna wins the hearts of Okonkwo's family, especially of Okonkwo's and Nwoye's. The reason behind Okonkwo's fondness towards Ikemefuna is Nwoye, Okonkwo's lazy son, who resembles his grandfather Unoka. The fondness of Okonkwo towards Ikemefuna is inward as Okonkwo considers outward expression of love and affection as a sign of weakness.

“To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstration was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everyone else – with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy”.² (p.20)

Okonkwo thinks it is feminine to express emotions and fears to be called as *agbala* by his clansmen. The only masculine emotion he finds apt to express is anger. Okonkwo's obsession to prove himself a man but not an *agbalalike* his father makes him a tough man and results in concealing his emotions even towards his immediate members of the family.

Though Okonkwo gives utmost importance to his clan's culture and tradition, there are instances where he gives more importance to his emotions and violates the clan's rules. One such incident takes place during the sacred Week of Peace. Okonkwo's youngest wife Ojiugo fails to cook his afternoon meal as she goes to a neighbour's house to plait her hair and provokes Okonkwo's anger which results in a sound beating after she returns home. Even though his other wives try to stop him, Okonkwo doesn't stop in a fear of being called weak, but not for the fear of a goddess.



“But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess”. (p. 21)

Okonkwo repents inwardly and pays for his crime of breaking the Week of Peace; he never expresses his repentance outwardly to anyone. In spite of his clansmen’s remarks that he has no respect for their gods, Okonkwo stands firm with his belief that it is not masculine to accept one’s errors in public. For Okonkwo there are certain norms regarding masculinity, which he considers to be very important to gain respect in the society. So he tells his sons the masculine stories of violence and bloodshed and encourages them to grumble about the women-folk.

“He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father’s household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors. He wanted him to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed his ancestors with regular sacrifices. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he was not really a man.” (p.37)

Okonkwo beats and rebukes his son Nwoye, who loves to listen to his mother’s stories, though he knows that a man is expected to be masculine and violent. Okonkwo’s persistence makes Nwoye to feign disinterest for women’s stories.

After the New Yam festival, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest man in Umuofia tells Okonkwo that The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves prophesizes to kill Ikemefuna and warns Okonkwo not to bear a hand in his death as the boy calls him father. The next morning Okonkwo and Ikemefuna join the Umuofian men. As they walk in the forest, one of the men raises his machet and strikes Ikemefuna. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo, but out of fear of being thought weak, Okonkwo draws his machet and cuts him down.



“He heard Ikemefuna cry, ‘My father, they have killed me!’ as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak”. (p.43)

Both Ikemefuna and Okonkwo have internal fears. Ikemefuna fears death, which he has no control over and Okonkwo, fears of being called effeminate, a fear which he can conquer but gives in to.

According to Lauryn Nosek (2008), Umuofia’s customs and traditions outweighed Okonkwo’s personal feelings in the situation. Okonkwo was mistaken in what the values were in this situation as they failed to comply with his real desire to partake in killing Ikemefuna, doing what his father would not have done. Okonkwo fears of giving himself some time to recover from slaying Ikemefuna and he considers it womanly to get depressed over a boy’s death. In his opinion, a man is not valorous if he cries. Okonkwo is more depressed with the idea that he is depressed.

“When did you become a shivering old woman,’ Okonkwo asked himself, ‘you are known in all the nine villages for your valor in war. How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo you have become a woman indeed’”. (p.45)

Okonkwo counts the absence of Obierika in killing Ikemefuna as cowardice. Though Obierika follows the norms of the Igbo society, unlike Okonkwo he uses his free will to decide and act. Obierika further says that what Okonkwo has done will not please the Earth and it will wipe out whole families.

“And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families”. (p.46)



In the obsession of portraying himself to be the perfect embodiment of the Igbo society, Okonkwo actually goes against the Igbo culture and traditions, fails to be emotional, and unconsciously suppresses himself from being what he is. Though Okonkwo accepts his banishment from Umuofia and his uncle Uchendu's family warmly welcomes them and gives them a plot to cultivate, Okonkwo and his family work very hard, but without any vigour and enthusiasm.

During Okonkwo's exile, the white man establishes his government, law, schools and brings new religion too. The white missionaries arrive in Umuofia, Mbanta and the other neighbouring villages and start spreading the word of God. The converts from the Igbo community are mostly the *efulefu*, i.e. those who have no titles, the worthless people according to the Igbo standards. The white missionaries also come to Mbanta and sermon the people despite the clansmen making fun of them. Okonkwo gets convinced that the missionary is mad, but it is Nwoye who gets attracted to this new faith.

“The missionary ignored him and went on to talk about the Holy Trinity. At the end of it Okonkwo was fully convinced that the man was mad. He shrugged his shoulders and went away to tap his afternoon palm-wine.

But there was a young lad who has been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son”. (p.104)

Initially, Okonkwo desires to fight against the church and wipe them off Mbanta, but he puts off his fury as he feels that Nwoye is not worth fighting for. He fears of his other sons to follow Nwoye and convert into the new faith after his death. For Okonkwo, it is a terrible prospect of annihilation, and he considers Nwoye's conversion as an abomination. Okonkwo recalls his popular name, the *roaring flame* as he looks into the log of fire, and then at the smoldering log, and sighs as he understands why he begot a son like Nwoye, because *“living fire begets cold, impotent ash”*. (p.109)



In his seven years of exile, Okonkwo raises to greater heights in his motherland, Mbanta but, he always regrets that he would have prospered better in his fatherland where his people were warlike. Okonkwo is grateful to his kind kinsmen but regrets every single day of his exile as he thinks of climbing greater heights if he was in Umuofia. For Okonkwo, Mbanta is a womanly clan as they welcome the conversion of his son and keep calm on the issue of killing the sacred python. Things alter in Umuofia during Okonkwo's exile. The white man brings not only a government, but also a trading store. Consequently, money flows in Umuofia. Mr. Brown, the white missionary visits Okonkwo and tells him about Nwoye's achievement. In spite of being happy, Okonkwo threatens him and drives him away from the compound. The clan makes amends with the white men. Okonkwo grieves and mourns for the clan, as it breaks up and falls apart. He mourns for the warlike men of Umuofia, who are now soft like women but there are many men and women in Umuofia who didn't react like Okonkwo.

Series of events like destruction of the church, unmasking the *egwugwu*, Okonkwo's arrest take place. When Umuofia decides not to wage war against the court messengers who came to warn them in the market yard, Okonkwo descends his matchet twice and kills the head-messenger. Instead of fighting with the messengers, the Umuofian men let them escape. *"They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: 'Why did he do it?'*

He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away." (p.145)

Realizing that his clansmen have failed to support him, though it is a great sin in Igbo tradition to commit suicide, Okonkwo hangs himself as he doesn't want to get killed by a white man.

Lauryn Nosek (2008) puts Okonkwo's suicide in this way, 'In a way, Okonkwo's suicide really did conform to the ways of Umuofia; the true Umuofia that Okonkwo had been able to identify with and that he sought validation from had killed itself with its pliability towards the new ways'.



Conclusion:

It is inevitable for the society to undergo change, so do the people. If one cannot accept and adapt these changes, they fall prey to it. Similarly, Okonkwo falls prey to colonization. Okonkwo's inflexible will, led to his downfall. A self-made, passionate, brave warrior like Okonkwo resists the irreversible transformation of Igbo society, and even the old traditions through the abominable act of committing suicide.

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