

VENERATING CULTURE: A STUDY OF STRUCTURAL DESIGN OF *THINGS FALL APART*

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Aristotle's principle that the portrayal of protagonists of existential texts, tragedy being one as such, follows the *mythos* (i.e. plot construction or the narrative) of the text is something, which goes unchallenged. Tragic heroes, in fact, unlike those of comedy, are not strongly free to design their course of life; rather, the reverse takes place. Many literary critics have noted several similarities between *Things Fall Apart*ⁱ and classical tragedies like *Oedipus* and *Hamlet* in the European tradition. Chinua Achebe was asked in one interview: "How do you respond to critics reading Okonkwo as a hero in terms of Aristotle's concept of tragedy?" Achebe replied: "No. I don't think I was responding to that particular format. This is not, of course, to say that there is no relationship between these. ... I think a lot of what Aristotle says makes sense".ⁱⁱ The difference that Achebe wants to make is obviously the concept of noble birth and a few others which do not apply in Okonkwo's case; and what he considers makes a sense is that the existential principle of life is subordinate to external actions and conditions.

The predicament of these characters can be ensured by the erratic nature of events that come to them unwarranted. One can see Oedipus toiling in between his unfortunate birth to meeting and killing his father, marrying his own mother to lastly blinding himself; Hamlet's nomadic fate from his father's foul murder to deserting Ophelia for the cause of revenge to his doom in the last. Similarly in *Things Fall Apart* the protagonist, Okonkwo, an icon of tribal action is lastly outplayed by the external conditions, which contaminate his actions. These actions are set as the natural and intimidating facts of society against which an individual looks so helpless that he has no option but to adhere to them only. However Achebe never puts his hero in hostile circumstances, as is the case in Aristotelian tragedies. Achebe's Okonkwo never considers the social environment as hostile rather he is the great adherent of social festivals, principles, rituals, and beliefs to which he finds himself always compatible. But he too like all tragic heroes is what Northrop Frye said about Shakespearean heroes is a "Fool of Time". Okonkwo in order to maintain his masculine pride is born to wrestle with indomitable Amalinze the Cat; to feed the entire community on various rituals; to marry three wives and command them with iron rod; to kill even, by his own hands, the most affectionate Ikemefuna; to hate fine arts because his father loved it therefore called *agabala* (lazy and effeminate) in his clan; to hate Nwoye's love to music and Christianity; to thrash and kill the white missionary who tries to mock his tribal pride, and then to kill himself because he thinks it better to end his life than insulted and hanged in public by the whites.

The paper aims at bringing out the various myths, rituals, and other tribal customs illustrated in *Things Fall Apart* as the basic tools of framing the texture of the whole text. In fact

these rituals, which are scattered throughout the text, are the main agents of portraying the character of the protagonist Okonkwo in particular and Ibo Nigerians in particular. Throughout the discussion the organizational and thematic aspects (i.e. *mythos* and *dianoia*) have been given equal importance. Further, the text has been interpreted under the light of ongoing principles of postcolonial writings since *Things Fall Apart* happens to be a pioneer postcolonial text of its own kind.

The biggest strength of Post Colonial Theory is to bring back the esthetics of literature into its Social milieu. It has brought back once again the interpretation of art against the social, cultural and political conditions that made it to grow. The other incentives added to the postcolonial writings are larger coverage on the entire socio-political cultural history of the region of which the characters are the products. The protagonists or other characters do not show extremist and unitary individualism that is often delineated in strong protest against socially organized way of living. Chinua Achebe, of course, champions the cause of colonized people in terms of introducing not the exceptionally typed individuals but the representatives of the masses, tribes and the concerned humanity. When asked a question why has he given broad space to state-social-politics in his works, whereas most of the American Writers have eschewed or marginalized the political in their work? Achebe answers:

“All I can say is that an apolitical stance was not there at the beginning of the novel. It is something that’s happened during the last two hundred years.... Our business involves the peace, happiness and harmony of not just people but the planet itself, the environment.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Now the issue is how Achebe makes a difference from many other writers of the third world countries, another nomenclature given to postcolonial settings? The postcolonial writings have typical characteristics of their own. The Nobel prize-winning Caribbean poet Derek Walcott declares that history in the Third World has thus far produced only a "literature of recrimination and revenge written by the descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters". These authors have shown us only the negative consequences of colonialism. Is it possible that there is another path leading from the crossroads of which Achebe speaks? A means of negotiating the conflicting cultures to achieve a solid and positive sense of identity?^{iv} Achebe considers it part of his duty to apprise to his readers the ground conditions of which they are the products. I think that for me it’s definitely been advantage to be able to invoke the culture of my past and the language that went with it while dealing with a contemporary situation.”^v

Further Achebe associates culture with the dignity of the people. His often quoted remark that African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans is the fundamental basis for his writings. He says:

It is this dignity that many African peoples lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must now regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer’s duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can’t tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them. After all the novelist’s duty is not to beat this morning’s headline in topicality, it is

to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task unless he has a proper sense of history”^{vi}.

The feeling that comes here is such as he is writing an epic “justifying the ways of God to men”. It’s a kind of regaining the paradise.

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe's first novel, was published in 1958 in the midst of the Nigerian renaissance. It tells the story of an Igbo (Ibo) village of the late 1800's and one of its great men, Okonkwo, who has achieved much in his life. He is a champion wrestler, a wealthy farmer, a husband to three wives, a title-holder among his people, and a member of the select *egwugwu* whose members impersonate ancestral spirits at tribal rituals. Set in this historical context, Achebe's novel develops the theme of traditional verses change, and offers a powerful presentation of the beauty, strength, and validity of traditional life and values and the disruptiveness of change. In order to achieve the cultural history of the Igbo community in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe, as a skilled craftsman constitutes the proper beginning, middle, and proper end therein. He constructs an exposition, achieves the climax and fishes out denouement. If we keep Okonkwo in center of this development of *mythos* (and of course it is he predominantly in the center and it is he who falls apart) the plot structure from exposition to the climax it can be visualized from Okonkwo’s youthful prosperity as a masculine icon of warrior and farmer to the inadvertent Killing of Azeudu’s son at his burial. The killing is considered as the ‘female crime’ in the society, and therefore, he has to flee from the clan. It is, in fact, now the start of subdued life in exile to his motherland Mbiano for seven years. This sudden anticlimax comes as one premonition to him: He has no option but to take on this travail and progress once again. The things obviously do not turn to center as the time passes. The arrival of Missionaries and his abominable insult gives him enough to shape his end.

The novel begins in Umuofia and ends in Umuofia. The beginning and end of the novel itself makes it region and society centric. The various events are the common occurrences in such tribal society and the hero is seen either coping with or acting against the set norms. The discussion to follow will explain in its limitations why do the community celebrations make Okonkwo unhappy? What is the symbolic meaning of the Week of Peace for the Igbo people? How does Okonkwo's anger violate the custom and what are the consequences of his action? These signposts of the Igbo culture are constructed intelligently at various places in the novel by Chinua Achebe to bring out the natural-social character of the protagonist.

What Chinua Achebe needs to portray about the Niger icon of bravery Okonkwo is the conditions in which the hero could surge himself up and down to make unity with them. Okonkwo breaking the neck of Amalinze the Cat and then hanging himself defeated by the conditions brings out the complete social structure of the Umofia tribe in particular and the Nigers in general. Achebe brilliantly balances the exposition part of the novel with the concluding part. Okonkwo’s prosperity under the cultural envelops of unity and strength in the beginning has been contrasted to the disintegration and cowardice of his tribesmen in the last part of the novel. In the beginning the various rituals, ceremonies, myths are abundantly brought out to color the protagonist and his fellows as cultural icons. It’s a society where an individual is not judged against the shadow of his father but the achievements of himself. Okonkwo had everything to be ashamed of his effeminate, sluggish and art-loving father Unoka who gave nothing to Okonkwo except shame, embarrassment and anger. His father was called *agabala* (meaning a woman and one with no title at all) and so, Achebe writes, “Okokwo was ruled by an passion – to hate everything that his father had loved. One of those things was gentleness and

another was idleness” (TFA 13). The message is clear that Igbo culture looks down upon futile gentleness and sluggishness.

In order to intensify the tribal ruptures of Okonkwo, the introduction of Ikemefuna episode serves as a strong feature of the mythos. Ikemefuna’s stay with Okonkwo, whom he calls father now, and his slaughter by this great father figure, is probably the most poignant part of the novel. The insurmountable pathos reaches its climax when Okonkwo is asked to participate in the ill-fated child’s murder. “That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death... Yes, Umofia has decided to kill him. The oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it” (TFA 51). But he kills him as he was afraid of being thought weak” (TFA 55).

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so his children” (TFA 12) Achebe makes clear next that Okonkwo was not a cruel man down his heart. But it, was the ‘fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father’ that made him to look tough even on trivial issues where common Umofian would not lose his temper. In the whole clan, Unoka was infamous for his tendency to own debt, sluggishness, and cowardice of failure except that he was an adept flautist. But music or other fine arts are to go hand with hands with the machet and hoe. Udoka was another musician in the clan but he was not a failure like Unoka. He had great barn full of yams and had won the third highest title in the class. Okonkwo always prays to his gods not to give him a bad *chi* or personal god like his father.

Achebe obviously wants to give a scientific interpretation to the Igbo culture, which he has, strong reasons to make so. The cultural ambience of the story does not rely on the crude mythology and festive rituals only, one always has to have a practical sense to them; otherwise they may prove to be nonsense. One instance we already had in context of Unoka consulting the Oracle. When Okonkwo is confronted by an elderly fellow in a meeting as the former calls Osgo a woman because he had no titles, the elderly fellow warns him sternly that ‘those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.” (TFA 24) Okonkwo feels sorry of what he said, but all believed that what Okonkwo had achieved was not due to any benevolent spirit. Achebe writes: “That was not luck. At the most one could say that his *chi* or personal god was good. But the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also”. (TFA 25)

To this point of discussion Achebe has brought out clearly the concept of masculinity, prowess, clan’s pride along with the respect to the gods and deities. He has chosen the most potent representative of the Ibo society. Okonkwo has got three wives and many sons and daughters. Now this is an opportunity to Achebe to develop Okonkwo and his story in relation to his three wives and children. Achebe makes clear in Chapter Two how Okonkwo handled his family. In fact the myth behind this iron ruling on the household by the master male is that of a prosperous household. The male principle is required for planting, nourishing and harvesting yam, the staple food for such societies. He has to guide the whole flock towards achieving this prosperity. The novelist mentions clearly that yam stood for manliness and those who fed their families on yams were considered to be great men in the class.

But even as controller of the whole household Okonkwo cannot be cursed for doing any unwanted and whimsical hardship on his family members. This is what happens when he beats his youngest wife Ojiugo in the sacred week of peace. This sacred week is the week of leisure between harvest and planting. He could have avoided beating Ojiugo for not preparing his afternoon meal and leaving her children on pity of others, had he been a man of extraordinary patience. But since he was not so he did what he found justifiable. But a ritual breaker is not

acceptable to the goddess Ani on any ground. Ezeani, the earth goddess Ani rebukes him “your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her... You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries”. (TFA 28) Okonkwo does as has been instructed by Ezeani because he can never afford breaking the great tradition of his ancestors. He even with great fervor prepares for celebrating the Feast of the New Year, though he never likes himself sitting idle amidst the crowd of his relatives. He loves to work and work only.

The beautiful revelations of Ibo culture invariably make the conscious clansmen to build up strong confidence regarding their society. Okonkwo’s sitting with Oberieka brings one interesting news to the reader. Some very old man called Nndulue has died. He was one of the oldest and most respected men of Umofia. What is more interesting in the news is that his first wife Ozoemena too died some hours after him. Now the problem is this that Nndulue can be buried only after his wife is buried. Later we find Okonkwo and Obierika engaged in talking on the importance and value of having titles to oneself. The readers come to know that Okonkwo and Obierika cannot tap palm trees to have wine for them. It is now the work of some other one who does not have the *Ozo* title. They also highlight the unscientific and sometimes nonsense principles involved in such titles. In some clans, titles holders cannot climb up even trees. In some clans these titles are worth two cowries and even a beggar can have them.

There are many flashbacks in the story. It is quite usual of Okonkwo to go back to the desultory state of his lazy father, or his struggle to bring up Ezinma his most loving daughter out of her curse as an *ogbanje*. *Ogbanje* are one of those wicked children who at their death enter the womb of their mothers to be born again and die again, and thus, making a cycle of death and rebirth. Ezinma too was born as an *ogbanje* despite the pooja, rituals, and lessons done to Okonkwo and his second wife Ekwefi. Okonkwo this time pleads the medicine man to finish the problem once forever. Ezinma’s *iyi-uwa* has to be dug out to kill the spirit of *ogbanje* forever. It’s a very arduous task because many times *ogbanje* mislead the priest to wrong directions and direct them to dig deep. But it is probably the fear of Okonkwo to Ezinma that she with some caprice brings them to the place where she has buried her *iyi-uwa*. “Is this yours”, asked the priest, and when Ezinma replied in affirmation all the women shouted with joy because at last the troubles of Ekwefi were ended. (TFA 77)

Probably one of the best scenes of cultural richness which brings the ancestors, individuals, groups and the offenders together is that one of the case of Mgbafo and Uzowulu. The charge on Uzowulu is that of behaving like a beast with his wife Mgbafo and therefore her brothers do not want her to go back to this beast. Whereas Uzowulu charges Mgbafo’s brothers of keeping her hostage and not allowing her to come to her; and therefore he wants back the bride price. This is an intricate matter and the truth behind the allegations of each has to be found out. The matter is brought before the *egwugwu*, the ancestral spirits represented by the respected ones of the society. Okonkwo too is one representative as such. Even the meanest of the sinners have to submit them to *egwugwu*. The spirits handle the case intelligently and read out their verdict to Uzowulu: “Go to your in-laws with a pot of wine and beg your wife to return to you. It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman.”(TFA 85).

It is really very difficult for a novelist to delineate the character of his protagonist with all other attributes of nature when a particular nature is predominant. Okonkwo throughout the story is seen as a hard, masculine, unemotional, and rude master towards his wives and children. But this is not the case, nor is this the justification of the ongoing *mythos* of the novel. After all his

domestic rudeness to his household members, Okonkwo is deeply attached with them. He wants Nwoye, the eldest of his sons to become like him; he wishes that Ezinma who he considers has got the true spirit of the society, should better have been son, and so on. His love and responsibility towards his wives and children is seen when Chielo, the priestess of Agabala, comes to their *obi* in the middle of the night shrieking and chanting the name of Agabala and asking Okonkwo and Ekwefi to give her Ezinma as Agabala wanted to see his child immediately. Okonkwo tries to avoid this fearful situation on the pretext of Ezinma's sickness, but knows that Chielo is not her self and so obeys what she wants him to do. He, of course, does not follow immediately the priestess to the darkened and terrible paths like Ekwefi, but does the best probably a man can do.

When Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his matchet to the shrine, where he thought they must be.... It was only on his forth trip that he had found Ekwefi, and by then he had become gravely worried. (TFA 102)

During this part of the story Okonkwo's heroic character has been portrayed almost in aspects of its variety. Probably this we can consider as the organizational climax of the novel. In the mean time the novelist utilizes every source of rituals on occasions like wedding, funeral, births and deaths in the society to present the colorfulness of Ibo culture in terms of other integral elements of a healthy culture like anecdotes, proverbs, tales, songs, complaints and compliments in the society. Achebe brilliantly chooses the occasion of the funeral of Ezeudu to bring a heavy crackdown on Okonkwo. It was during the gun salute to this great old soldier, Okonkwo inadvertently killed the sixteen-year-old son of the departing soul itself. This was a female crime and the only way open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan because by the morning neither he nor his property will remain erect on the land. It's a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman. Now he could return to the clan after seven years. It was to his motherland called Mbanta that Okonkwo, after collecting his carry-able valuables, along with his wives and children, was fleeing. (TFA 113)

Okonkwo's stay with his mother's kinsmen can be seen as the reversal of fortune to him in particular and to the whole tribal culture in general. His maternal uncle Uchendu offers him a plot of land where Okonkwo once again erects his prosperity, though, the magnanimity and grandeur that he had in his father's land was nowhere to be found here. It is in the second year of his exile Okonkwo comes to know from his visiting friend Obierika that Abame, a distant clan, has been completely wiped out by some band of people like us led by some whitemen. The oracle had said when the first white man riding his iron horse, came to Abame that this strange man and his alike would "break their clan and spread destruction among them." Therefore the locals killed him but on the market day when almost all were there these strangers shot them dead. The event can be seen as the turning point towards start of adversaries in the tribal culture.

It is nearly two years later when Obierika paid another visit to Okonkwo to give him the amount that he received from selling Okonkwo's land products, the latter came to know that the white missionaries have constructed their church in Umofia. Some *efulefu* i.e. worthless, empty men whom Chielo, the priestess of Agabala, calls 'excrement of the clan' have converted to their faith. What really grieves Okonkwo is to know that his Nwoye has accepted their faith and says Okonkwo is not my father. Okonkwo smells that some imminent evil is near to destroy his clansmen. But he is more grieved to know that these missionaries are, even if by casualness of his people, being entertained and not rebuked and chased out of their borders forever. The

curious and the moderates provide these Christians with plot of land in the dreaded evil forest expecting their destruction by the sinister spirits. But contrary to their expectation not only the whitemen but the converts also survive even a week after. Probably Okonkwo was the most concerned about this unseemly disintegration of the clan. “To abandon the gods of one’s own father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation...If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth.”(TFA 139).

What Okonkwo and his clansmen found more troublesome is the entirely opposite approach of the church and its bishop Mr. Kiaga towards the myths and beliefs of the tribal customs. The *efulefu* were already the passionate workers of this new faith. The converts had become more audacious to insult even the gods of the clan. This is what Okoli a degenerate convert did when he killed the sacred royal python. After a great debate on what to do of the church and its churchmen, Mbanta decided to punish them but Okoli died next day assuring them that their gods are still alive to punish their offenders.

The third part of the novel starts with Okonkwo’s return to his fatherland Umofia after seven years exile in Mbanta. He had already speculated over what an old man said to all amidst the feast Okonkwo had given to thank the people of Mbanta for their support throughout seven years. He remembered his words: “But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice”(TFA152). He had thanked Okonkwo specially “thank you for calling us together”. His return to Umofia was not as pleasant experience as he had thought. It seemed that a sense of detachment and self-centeredness has occupied his people. Nobody bothered that it was a warrior’s return. Moreover the converts in Umofia were not less in number compared to other villages, and the worse part was that these converts more profane than even Okoli who had killed the python.

This is what happens when an errant convert namely Enoch unmasked and abused one *egwugwu* on the day of annual worship of the earth goddess. Okonkwo could have killed himself if his people had not stood united having fire in their mind and machetes in their hands. It was immediately decided that the abominable church and its bastards like Enoch would have to be wiped out. Despite the protest of Mr. Brown the *egwugwu* did what they had decided. The church was lying red like a heap of ash. Okonkwo is happy again that his men have once again become men. This is why when the District Magistrate’s messenger comes to invite Okonkwo with five other clansmen, he doesn’t fear going to him. He asks them to go to the magistrate along with their arms. His culture had taught him to be wise and tactful and the same he did, but to their great surprise he along with his team were handcuffed treacherously. And then the contempt and insult meted out him and his friends is something, which he can forget only when he had wiped out the District Magistrate and his entire army. His killing of the magistrate’s messenger in the meeting that Umofia held to decide ‘what to do’ after the treatment Okonkwo and team had received was just a part of it. But he finally breaks when he sees that his clansmen actually did not like his killing of the messenger: “he knew that Umofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers 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 must have recalled his father Unoka saying to him once: “a proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man

fails *alone*.”(TFA 23)

The tragic ending of the novel with the suicide of Okonkwo was imminent. The cultural richness of the protagonist ends with the most abominable part of his culture. A saviour of the culture commits the sacrilege of hanging himself. He had envisaged the complete cultural collapse of his tribesmen, and under such degenerate and contemptuous state, in which their gods and deities are blasphemed, noble warriors insulted by a few tricksters publicly, he found it better to commit a cultural crime to himself than being hanged by the invaders. “It is against our custom”, said the people when asked by the magistrate why they couldn’t bring Okonkwo’s body down from the tree. One of them replies, “it is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. Only strangers may touch it. (TFA 186)

Magistrate’s reduction of Okonkwo’s history from a chapter to a reasonable paragraph highlights the conceited ignorance of the crusaders of Christ on the cultural richness of Nigers. Achebe, in fact, is very subtle to make the Magistrate write a book on the same issues, which he as a novelist had discovered to bring to the rest of the world. *Things Fall Apart* becomes the title of his perspectives whereas *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* is the perspective of the civilized strangers. The whole plot is pacified under the inverted ‘U’ shape, a tragic movement of cultural height to the cultural downfall.

Reference:

ⁱ Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Heineman Educational Books Ltd. London.

ⁱⁱ *Things Fall Apart: Study Guide: Reading & Study Questions*
(<http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/achebTFA.htm>), accessed on 20.09.2011

ⁱⁱⁱ“Chinua Achebe, An Interview” by *Bradford Morrow* (www.conjunctions.com/archives/c17-ca.htm) accessed on 09.09.2011.

^{iv}“Postcolonial Identity, Postcolonial Literature” by Heather Sofield, (www.scholars.nus.edu.sg/landow/post/zimbabwe/sofield/6.html) accessed on 09.10.2011

^v“Chinua Achebe, An Interview” by Bradford Morrow (www.conjunctions.com/archives/c17-ca.htm) accessed on 09.09.2011.

^{vi} “Chinua Achebe on the Role of the African Writer” quoted from
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