

Interplay Between Okonkwo's Fall And The Cultural Decline: Exploring Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

The present study focuses on the novel Things Fall Apart, written by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. The research paper explores the multifaceted dynamics between Okonkwo's character development, his rigid adherence to traditional values, and the forces of colonialism. This research also sheds light on the complex factors contributing to the cultural decline depicted in the novel. The purpose of this study is to do a close analysis of the novel to explore the intricate relationship between the personal downfall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and its broader implications on the disintegration of the traditional Igbo culture. Additionally, this study indicates a connection that forges a strong tie regarding the social structure of an Igbo clan individual by looking to the arrival of Christian missionaries in the Umuofian village that altered the Igbo clan's way of life and beliefs.

Keywords: Igbo clan, traditional values, colonialism, post-colonialism

I. Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* stands as an influential work in African literature, portraying the complex dynamics of tremendous societal changes during the colonial era. At the heart of this narrative lies the tragic tale of Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist, whose personal downfall intertwines with the larger theme of cultural decline. This research paper delves into the interplay between Okonkwo's fall and the cultural deterioration depicted in the novel, seeking to unravel the intricate connections between individual tragedy and broader societal transformation. Through *Things Fall Apart* Achebe offers a poignant exploration of the Igbo community in pre-colonial Nigeria and the profound impact of European colonization on their traditional way of life. The protagonist, Okonkwo, a proud and ambitious warrior, becomes emblematic of the tension between tradition and change. As the story unfolds, Okonkwo's tenacious adherence to traditional values and his refusal to adapt to the encroaching forces of colonialism lead to his tragic downfall. This paper aims to delve into the nuanced portrayal of Okonkwo's character development and the ways in which it reflects and influences the cultural decline within the Igbo society.

By examining Achebe's narrative techniques and thematic choices, one can gain insights into the author's purposeful commentary on the consequences of cultural erosion and the resilience of indigenous cultures. Achebe's vivid depiction of the Igbo way of life, traditions, and rituals allows readers to witness the gradual erosion of cultural practices, belief systems, and communal bonds. This research explores the implications of such cultural decline, not only for the Igbo people but also for postcolonial societies at large. Through a comprehensive analysis of the novel, supplemented by relevant literary and cultural theories, this research paper seeks to shed light on the interplay between Okonkwo's personal tragedy and the broader context of cultural transformation. By unraveling these intricate connections, we aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the impact of colonialism on indigenous cultures, the complexities of individual agency and cultural adaptation, and the enduring significance of cultural resilience in the face of societal upheaval.

II. Discussion

Relationship between Hero and Culture:

The main character of the narrative, Okonkwo, has a strong connection to society, culture, and tradition. For the first time in the story, the author conveys the protagonist's deep regard for society's culture, traditions, and customs. The author of Chapter Four explains their clan's peace week and his appreciation for it. Due to his inability to preserve the calm during the week of peace, he is forced to buy expensive items and services for the priest of the earth goddess. He pays them without speaking since it is clear to him that he must pay attention and follow the clan's traditions. Because he is a man, he may easily rebel against the culture.

“The evil you have done have done can ruin the whole clan. You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries.” (Achebe 28)

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In several other circumstances, in addition to this one, he contributes fully to the preservation of the culture without even considering his personal satisfaction. We can observe this happening with Ikemefuna, who lived in Okonkwo's hut for three years. Ikemefuna is a little boy who was given as a gift to a young virgin by a neighbour tribe to prevent conflict with Umuofia. Okonkwo likes Ikemefuna a lot, and this devotion is strengthened by Ikemefuna referring to Okonkwo as "my father," despite the fact that Okonkwo does not appear to have any sympathy or compassion for Ikemefuna. He has feelings for Ikemefuna for another reason. Nwoye is now more manly than before because of his connection to Ikemefuna. But regrettably, Okonkwo murders Ikemefuna.

"That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (Achebe 51)

While some individuals, like Obierika, who are travelling to the bush to murder Ikemefuna, choose not to go, Okonkwo goes without giving it a second thought.

"my father, they have killed me!" as he ran toward him" "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down" (Achebe 55)

After the passing of Ikemefuna, his pains, according to the book, are quite obvious. However, he takes these actions in order to elevate his culture, traditions, and tribe. Because an Oracle is an important part of their culture and civilization, everyone should be concerned about his forecasts. He is a major person in that community.

"You have not eaten for two days," said his daughter Ezinma when she brought the food to him. So you must finish this." (Achebe 57)

Another instance makes clear Okonkwo's unshakeable connection to his clan and its way of life. Accidentally, Okonkwo's rifle explodes a piece of iron at Ogbuefi Ezeudu's cremation, killing Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. They believe that murdering a member of the same clan is a great sin for which the offender must abandon the clan for seven years. Okonkwo decides to leave his tribe with the hopes of coming back after seven years. Even though he leaves the clan in order to uphold its traditions and customs, Okonkwo's close buddy Obierika obviously has a different perspective that is wholly at odds with their culture and customs.

"Obierika was a man who thought about things. When the will of the goddess had been done, he sat down in his obi and mourned his friend's calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?" (Achebe 113)

However, he leaves his origins and moves to his mother's village, Mbanta, where he takes up farming. It amply demonstrates his tremendous commitment on behalf of his tribe and culture. He has three wives, three homes, two barns, an animal farm, and is well-known and affluent in his clan. He is well aware that the members of the clan will destroy everything when they leave. But he departs the clan with his wife and kids, gathering the fewest number of possessions without any desire or sense of loss for his earthly possessions. The only thing we can make out in his thoughts is that he has this idea to go back to his tribe in seven years.

"The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land" (Achebe 113)

As a result, he has a very strong desire to return to his tribe after seven years since he feels so strongly connected to his clan and its culture throughout the whole book. From the start of the narrative until Chapter 14, there isn't a single event that might be seen as changing the protagonist's life for the worst. However, the author claims that the origin of his unfortunate destiny would be revealed in Chapter 15. Okonkwo learns of the coming of the white people from Obierika in Chapter 15 for the first time.

"During the last planting season, a white man had appeared in their clan. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." (Achebe 125)

With Obierika's comments, Okonkwo starts to imagine white people as deadly beasts out to destroy their clan, culture, and civilization in accordance with the Oracle's warning. He always gets cautious not to approach white people and to avoid them in their culture while he is thinking about them. Okonkwo is a person who is constantly working to defend his tribe and culture. Missionaries travel to Umuofia around this time and convert a few people for them. Among those converts, one may also notice Okonkwo's son.

"What moved Obierika to visit Okonkwo was the sudden appearance of the latter's son, Nwoye, among the missionaries in Umuofia" (Achebe 130)

“And so Obierika went to Mbanta to see his friend. And he found that Okonkwo did not wish to speak about Nwoye” (Achebe 131)

These lines from the book *Things Fall Apart* make it very obvious that the protagonist's sacrifice was made to preserve his tribe and tradition. Animals typically show a lot of love to their young. However, in the book, Okonkwo takes his son away from his family because he values his tribe and tradition above everything else. He wants to maintain his clan's sense of who he is. He values his culture and tribe more than his own blood. This demonstrates the strong link between culture and society. Although there are many characters that talk about their tribe, none of them are as heroic as Okonkwo, who gives his life for his clan and culture.

It shows the arrival of Okonkwo for his place in Umuofia after seven years in Chapter Twenty. When he comes there all the things have changed and he feels sorry about his clan and its members. But still, he has some ideas to restart his clan and the culture. But he is the only man who wants to re-establish his clan and the culture. Except for Okonkwo and a few clansmen, most of the people have converted to Christianity and like to embrace the new culture introduced by white people.

“Does the white man understand our custom about land?” “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?” (Achebe 160)

From this type of conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo, it is possible to understand the current situation of Umuofia and the courage of the people to establish their clan, culture and tradition of their society again. It shows that most of the people have given up their ideas to rebuild their culture and the clan. But Okonkwo still wants to collect the values of his culture and the clan.

In the final half of the story, we can see there is an annual worship for the earth goddess and it is held on Sundays. The people who are going to worship the earth goddesses make masks in their faces by using beautiful colours. They don't remove these masks until the ceremony is over. During this period a person calls Enoch unmasks a person. Enoch is the son of Snake priest who is believed to have killed and eaten the secret Python (snake) and he is a converter of missionaries. Because of these reasons, the men of Umuofia burn the hut of Enoch and the church of Reverend James Smith. This is depicted the anger of the clan because they are concerned it as same to destroy their culture and tradition. Because of this happening the leaders of Umuofia keep in prison by the District Commissioner and they have to face many difficulties which are coming from the white people at the prison.

“The six men ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together.” (Achebe 173/174)

In this way at the beginning of the rebellion, though Okonkwo can find out the people to fight against white people and their church, he cannot continue his effort beyond that. After the arrival of the leaders from the prison, Umuofia held a meeting in the marketplace. In that situation, five court messengers come to the marketplace and Okonkwo kills the head of the messengers and the other four messengers escape with the help of the clansmen.

“In a flash, Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body” (Achebe 184)

In this situation, the protagonist gets aware that though he wants to avoid the changes that are going to happen, others don't want to evade them. He understands that though he wants to preserve their culture without pointing outsiders' hands into their clan, others don't want to do such sacrifices for the safety of their clan. So he becomes aware that most people like to embrace a new culture and tradition which introduces by missionaries.

“He knew 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 voices asking “Why did he do it?” (Achebe 184)

Finally, as a result of his distress, he hangs himself in a tree in his compound. So at the end of the novel, we can see the tragic end of the protagonist. Now we can get a clear understanding of how the writer indicates the death of the culture through the death of the protagonist of the novel.

Okonkwo is the only man of Umuofia who wants to fight for the protection of culture, clan and tradition. Throughout the journey of his life, he makes many attempts to protect the clan. He makes many sacrifices and even he gives up his own son also. Finally, he understands the reality that he cannot do this alone without other's help and he commits suicide. In the final half of the novel, the writer depicts how Okonkwo's body hangs on a tree without any concern of

the people. The people don't pay any special attention to offering him respect or a good burial. According to the District commissioner, Okonkwo who tries his best to protect the clan and the culture receives treatment like a dog.

"That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself, and he will be buried like a dog..." (Achebe 187)

This symbolizes that anyone in the clan does not care about the culture of the society anymore. After the death of Okonkwo, there is no other man in Umuofia who wants to fight with missionaries to preserve their culture and their clan. Therefore, it is able to say that "the hero's fall indicates the culture's fall" in the novel *Things Fall Apart*.

III Conclusion

It may thus be concluded that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers a profound exploration of the complexities of societal transformation during the colonial era. The paper uncovers the intricate connections between Okonkwo's personal tragedy and the broader implications for the Igbo community and understands how his story serves as a microcosm for the larger challenges faced by indigenous cultures in the face of colonization. Achebe's work stands as a timeless testament to the importance of embracing cultural diversity, recognizing the impact of historical forces on individual lives, and nurturing the resilience of indigenous cultures in the face of societal change.

The arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia was to take over the ruling of it and because Igbo are a compassionate society that was also unsuspecting of the white men's intentions, they welcomed them into their land and also gave them a piece of their land not knowing that these men will be the cause of the collapse of their culture. Without culture Igbo society is as good as dead, hence the significance of Okonkwo's death in the end. Like Okonkwo, the Igbo committed suicide by not being suspicious of the white missionary's intentions in their land or questioning his presence. The whole story shows very clearly how the relationship between the death of the protagonist and the culture of Igbo in the Umuofian village.

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