

# THINGS FALL APART AND ACHEBE'S SEARCH FOR MANHOOD

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**child  
trafficking**

**Chinua Achebe**

**colonization**

**identity**

**metaphor**

**patriarchy**

**sexuality**

**Things Fall  
Apart**

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Chinua Achebe's archetypal *Things Fall Apart*, a quintessential *man* novel, and the first novel I read in primary school from my father's African Writers Series collection ten years after its publication, impressed my young mind. Two pivotal incidents, separate but related, struck me then and have remained with me even as I contemplate its psychological implications. Defining the central issues at stake in African society, they encapsulate the very ambiguous tenets with which to navigate issues of identity in the postcolonial novel and are in a sense a throwback to other literatures and societies. The first revolves around Ikemefuna and the *unnamed* girl sacrificed (read also unnamed masses sacrificed) by the people of Mbaino to the village of Umuofia in reparation for the killing of Ogbuefi Udo's wife, reminiscent of Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery' and also introduces topical issues of child trafficking and prostitution. Ikemefuna, gradually reconciled to his second home in Okonkwo's household, comes to address Okonkwo as 'Father'. Three years later, recalling this, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the oldest Umuofia man, cautions Okonkwo 'to have nothing to do with' Ikemefuna's death:

Okonkwo walked behind [Ikemefuna]. *He could not imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father* ... One of the men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back ... As the man ... drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. 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. (Achebe 1988: 56–8; my emphasis)

The second incident focuses on Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife and mother of Ezinma, the obanje child, after Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, takes Ezinma into the Oracle's cave. Distraught, Ekwefi trails Chielo to the cave's mouth, falls asleep and wakes up to find Okonkwo waiting with her. Ekwefi recalls the youthful innocence and credulity with which she had abandoned her poor first husband Anene after two years of marriage for Okonkwo on a whim. On her way to fetch water from the stream, she had simply stopped by Okonkwo's hut and knocked on his door:

Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth. (94)

Let us get beyond the repulsive catcalls a reading of this passage provokes now as it did fifty years ago. What has changed? I am reminded here of the saying that the more things change the more they remain the same. African men do not discuss the intimate intricacies of sexual intercourse. It is consigned to the darkness, and the dark for Africans as for other societies is associated with evil, the unknown. How can an act which provokes orgasm and is at the centre of any life or society remain in the dark, not to be talked about? Clearly, this has to do with attitudes which have not changed throughout Africa, as a sampling of writing such as Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* demonstrates. Male dominance of the African woman has been embedded in a subterfuge akin to the colonizer's dominance of the colonized.

Throughout, Achebe emphasizes Okonkwo's bravery and fearlessness; he is the complete antithesis to his weak father, Unoka. But Achebe's insistence is itself telling; inundated with proverbs, Achebe appropriates the English language as Mark Twain had in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but forgets that 'the pear cannot fall too far from the tree'. The downward spiral for Okonkwo only seemingly starts with the death of Ikemefuna. Looking back, Achebe calls this novel 'an act of atonement with [his] past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son' (Achebe 1988: 193), for he has in a paradoxical sense seen the light, as the title taken from W. B. Yeats' 'The Second Coming' attests; a poem which, like T. S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland', speaks to the devastation, topsy-turvy

and disorder characterizing the land in the wake of the First World War. Is this analogous to the West's unavowed atonement expressed in its many self-serving development aid programmes to underdeveloped (child) and powerless (effeminate) countries?

But things do not begin to fall apart in Umuofia only with the advent of the white man. Long before that, as the two excerpts illustrate, vital sections of the population had been silenced within the family and society: the woman and the child. Achebe acknowledges the central creative role of the woman to African life when he explains 'why we say that mother is supreme' (Achebe 1988: 112), as well as the importance of the child, displaying a traditional reverence for motherhood. The metaphor of motherhood informs all creative energies of the woman, focusing on her closeness to the earth as the repository of the spirit of the ancestors in her biological connections to the rhythms of birth, growth and death and her proximity to traditional African culture in a world increasingly besieged by western mores. In this light, we apprehend the duplicity in the word *Agbala/agbala*, which names a god and means a woman – the name given to a title-less man (25). The woman therefore is worthless, as Okonkwo insinuates in his exchange with Obierika at the sudden death of Ogbuefi Ndulue following the death of Ozoemena, the latter's wife:

'It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind,' said Obierika. 'I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her.'

'I did not know that,' said Okonkwo. 'I thought he was a strong man in his youth.'

'He was indeed,' said Ofoedu.

*Okonkwo shook his head doubtfully.*

'He led Umuofia to war in those days,' said Obierika. (64; my emphasis)

The family unit is at the core of all human achievement; yet this novel abounds in instances when the child's voice and the woman's voice are stifled every time one of them speaks. (Let us not forget the number of times women are battered in this novel.) Even Achebe will not let Ekwefi tell us what she felt at *that* moment when Okonkwo took her into his room. It is the man, Okonkwo, who is privileged, as in the nascent stages of postcolonial literatures of England and America where hegemony is predicated on a display of masculinity, a situation which finds consolation in the continuum of colonialism since it establishes an intimate relation between African men and the colonizer. If postcolonialism deals with cultural identity in a colonized society as postulated by Edward Said (1990), what does Achebe accomplish, as Terry Eagleton (1983: 12–13) has asked? And how does Achebe effectively rewrite our history by circumventing 'writing back to the centre', as Ashcroft et al. (1989) have suggested?

What possible justification can a father have for taking the life of his own son? The relationship between Nwoye and Okonkwo, which undergoes a metamorphosis once the former realizes the latter's part in Ikemefuna's death, parallels and adumbrates Okonkwo's denial of his effeminate father, Unoka. Okonkwo's constant need to prove and reassert his manhood speaks to a primal flaw, for despite his many wives, children and titles, Okonkwo is 'still a child' (Achebe 1988: 112), which can be interpreted as 'still underdeveloped' (reminiscent of Tom and Huck's eternal boyhood), as Uchendu proceeds to explain traditional practices to him. Yet Okonkwo's rejection of the father undergirds the narrative in very much the same manner as America's mythological rejection of Britain, anticipates the dissolution of the clan in *Arrow of God* and precurses the penultimate decay and collapse reflected in *No Longer at Ease* which completes the trilogy, and willy-nilly finds appeal in the original disobedience of Satan and Adam in Judeo-Christian mythology.

Okonkwo epitomizes power-hungry African leaders who have clearly surrendered their historical compass and keep (re)negotiating their identity. For how long can African leaders continue to do so? This begs the larger question, which is not whether prodigal Africa can regroup and deploy all agencies to centre itself in this global village, but whether even a healed, regrouped and reborn Africa can summon the generative resources – represented in this context by women, womanhood, motherhood, creativity and other marginalized groups – to help it achieve a more positive status and identity in the global village. For paradoxical as it may sound, it seems that Africa is now *at the centre*, but as a pariah, a byword for all that is negative, indeed aboriginal chaos. Remember Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

## References

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