



OKONKWO AS A CONFOUND TRAGIC HERO AND A CONFOUND MASCULINE FIGURE IN THINGS FALL APART

Manshok Konyak

School of Languages, Literature & Society, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, India.

Corresponding Email: manshokkonyak3@gmail.com

Abstract

The story is brilliantly told of a vigorous young man reckoned as "the proud and imperious emissary of war"; profound in his title. His personality was deeply revered and feared by the people around him, especially his wives and kids. How a brave unyielding pride of Umuofia once so reverential became a tragic hero, drowned by his own catharsis and inextricable peripeteia of life unleashed upon our hero Okonkwo. While travelling to keep his name venerated and revered, the protagonist is found perplexed as a father and as a hero of Umuofia; obliged to honour the peace offering and dare not defy the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. Ambiguously, Okonkwo is a confounding tragic hero who struggles with his own assumption of a successful masculine figure. His pursuit to become a diametric figure than his father Unoka made him less gentle of a kind for his loved ones. Which, in the end, is the ramification of his own downfall. He is left betrayed by his own drudge to remain a standing model of Umuofia.

Keywords: *Tragic flaw, confoundment, Oracle, disintegration. Colonialism.*



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Introduction

The brilliancy of this novel came to light when the twenty-seven-year-old Chinua Achebe discovered a manuscript, a poem in it written by the Irish poet W.B Yeats, entitled "Things Fall Apart". A young broadcasting service producer has found a new venture into the world of writings. The novel revolves around a protagonist Okonkwo and the sacredness of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves in Umuofia, the arrival of Christian missionaries all combined generates an experiential view in the overall story. The concluding part of the novel strikes the readers with the disintegration of the Umuofia world of Oracle and the protagonist is left with a sense of betrayal to which he holds his pride. He felt ostracised when he discovered that his tribesmen had started to embrace a new world of belief, the arrival of the Christian theology and the downfall of superstition, with the establishment of western governmental systems (Colonialism).

Another astonishment befalls upon the protagonist when Nwoye finds his interest at the dawn of a new belief, a new world of venture begins in his life which he did not understand fully but found his interest. His decision to leave his father Okonkwo rather than to renounce his faith to a new belief, propelled him to reckon Nwoye as degenerate and effeminate. He was not ready to accept the fact that Nwoye was abandoning his ancestral pride and their gods of the Hills and Caves. Apparently, a new breath of life was out of his power to control such sudden change. Okonkwo is left to wonder as if his kingdom was taken away from him in a blink of an eye.

“Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan”. (Achebi, 1996)

It was not only Okonkwo but the elders of the Umuofia lost their traditional judicial system. A new governmental system begets hierarchical order of dispensation among the lives of those that were not ready to face the sudden wave of change. It seems as though an old saying comes home to roost, a pen is mightier than the sword. Okonkwo's heart was filled with rage, his sleepless nights pondering on the act of vengeance. Hope in the wilderness that those glorious moments of entitlement would come back revitalised in Umuofia lay far behind his zeal to avenge white men.

A struggle in the anticipated masculine figure in Things Fall Apart.

Through the unending alteration and passes of civilization and human history, there has been an inevitable quest for self-identity. In the society, business market, family, peer group, or any identifiable community that is built upon mutual relationships. But above all one of the complex structures of nature, we can find is in the structure of the family. The problem we have in the family structure is highly complex to the extent that, experts in any academia irrespective of their area of specialization, there is so much discussion and a myriad of answers to find a remedy to avoid segregation of two bond individuals is a committed relationship. In a functioning group of communities, which are definitely built on hierarchy. In *Things Fall Apart* we see this struggle for identity in Okonkwo's belief about manhood. Although, he has deeply cultivated this concept from the squandering life of his father Unoka, that he will not carry the same badge of disregard like his father. In the novel, we see Unoka as a man with no dignity of his own in sheltering his family, no pride in maintaining the civility of manhood. A

man drowning in debts barely keeps his promise while borrowing money. According to his clan standard of judging a man's strength through the form of a toiling warrior which he could never meet in his lifetime. In contrast to his inability to become the kind of man his clan demanded and viewed, he appeared to be a gifted musician, although lazy and effeminate around. It seems as though the world they existed was bound by the limited range of exploration of endeavours, for a man to identify without boundary. Where Unoka was a gifted man when it comes to traditional instruments, which by far played no greater role. For Umuofia a man who cannot stand a look of blood, full of debts was nothing but a disgrace to the clan. In such a rigid culture of man's role (in terms of physical strength) being supreme, Unoka's only ability in music must have been battered by their clan's standard of judging manhood.

One of the states in North East India, Nagaland Naga people were headhunters before the arrival of Christianity in 1872. The symbolic significance of a brave man in their belief is seen in the act of barbarism. In fact, this demand for a man to display their strength for his tribe is seen only when an individual swung machetes through the neck of a person with the intention to show brevity. With that, the dignity of a warrior is known by the numbers of heads he has taken, while it is displayed with handmade ornaments worn around their neck. And with a countenance reflecting through the sun covered with tattoos, symbolizing the pride of a warrior. This can be seen through the story of a man either burdened by the demand of his clan to maintain the title as the strongest man in the clan, an emissary of war. An indispensable prerequisite before marriage. Otherwise, it was a deep primitive delusion of the time. A developed culture where if emotional, this would only indicate a sign of a weak man. Perhaps, another way around where true freedom to display man's ability is veiled by their own rigid construction of how masculine ability must be represented. How women were subjected to the belief of an unrefined cultural belief. Which overtime changed though.

From the incipient of human civilisation to the advancement of human civilisation to our time, there has been incredible evidence of how the strongest take position: with no undermining to the authority of any given position. To conclude with enough satisfaction is to say that hierarchy is in nature and not man-made propaganda or stigmatic system. Although in every existing structure a tyrannical structure is inevitable, that targets everyone under its shadow of hideousness. From the biblical perspective, God is the head of man, man is the head of a woman. While this surely doesn't imply dominating hierarchical systems prevailed ever since God created humans. While it may vary but mostly it was a channel of adherence and

responsibility guided by the all-knowing, all-powerful and all-present God, through the given word. If we look at the genetic code according to Charles Darwin, it is the strongest genetic code (that has the ability to survive) that add to the survival mode of the system, which simply means if you are strong and have the ability to adapt to the changing order of nature you will definitely survive and move to the next generation to add survival; ultimately resulting unique organism. Well, we can see that with human beings, how we organise ourselves in order to survive to the order of nature, through thick and thin. Humans progressed with the system of the hierarchical order of responsibility of a man and a woman. Naturally giving the order to the instinct disposition of a human being. Man can't breastfeed which gives more opportunity for a woman to stay behind (home) to look after children, while men had to go out hunting; literally means hunting ferocious animals. It is no wonder to say that man has to be strong physically, fearless, courageous, to face arduous obstacles required to bring home food. Nevertheless, in this modern world of liberalism, freedom of choice and freedom of speech there are no boundaries to any will of exploration and gratification. There is no dispute to say that a man like Okonkwo will not be accepted in this modern world of liberalism; free will. Perhaps, Okonkwo's wife will be reckoned as weak and subjected. Apparently, the society we live in with (certain man-made ethos), in overtime shapes the way we perceive the world around us, with no dispute Okonkwo's decision, action and personality were deeply navigated by the idea of a man as a model of strong build stature, with no emotion to unleash but to defend his dignity as a brave warrior. A man builds not only to defend his dignity but to abide by the law that holds his people under certain principles. Such a principle could only mean in modern time as primitive and unrefined. The sacrificial ritual, a must for restoring a sense of peace within the clans could only be seen as an evil diabolic act.

The protagonist is resilient in his obligation to keep the trust of his village alive. He is determined not to follow the footsteps of his father but in the consciousness of how dedicated he was, to remain the kind of man he thought was significantly vital led to his own downfall.

The delusion of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, a tragic flaw.

Aristotle in his Poetics defines a tragic hero as *a person who generates a sense of pity and fear in the audience or a reader. He must be a man of misfortune and the consequence of such downfall in the life of a tragic hero is through the error of judgment. Thus, this error is the result of what he calls 'hamartia' or a tragic flaw.* But how do we relate this in Okonkwo's case? Was there a flaw in Okonkwo's life? The readers are captured by the sense of catharsis

throughout the story. The whole scenario of how peace offering must be paid at any cost of extraction of resistance. At most readers at some point might have wished if the sacrifice could be avoided, and Okonwo would rebel against the rigid ritualistic beliefs (Oracle). His love for Ikemefuna remained shallow as Okonkwo never showed his affection. Thus, even when the pristine time came from the Hills and Caves for Ikemefuna to be sacrificed, he did not change the fate of Ikemefuna which could have been avoided. His consciousness of how weak he would look before his tribesmen deluded Okonkwo. This consciousness of Okonkwo was nothing but falsely carried beliefs of masculine strength among the Umuofia tribesmen. To voice out for the cost of love is a strength, this necessarily is not a feminine disposition of emotion but also the ability to express in the most human form of emotion as well. Hamlet failed 'to be' and his procrastination made him 'not to be' ultimately contributed to his downfall in the end. What could really devour a man's fate is what they hold as their belief which is conspicuous in this novel. At every level of analysis, we are propelled to look at the metastasized ramification of ritualistic belief and stigma of being weak. Okonkwo is freed from the call of the Oracle nevertheless, he is consumed by his own action. His compliance to the Oracle was his flaw. It seems as though he was honoured before his tribesmen but his very soul has left his being of what really makes him strong. Years passed by and Okonkwo has seen in Ikemefuna the courage and masculine figure he wished to see in his own biological sons. Even Nwoye's development into a generalised masculine character made him appreciate Ikemefuna for being around him, his presence impacted the growth of Nwoye and the life that awaits him will culminate as a young responsible man someday.

Okonkwo rose from nothing to be the most honoured warrior in the village. Splendid in his strength of command, he stood for what he believed was the only dignity he should stand in the fight for. What could be more tragic than for a man who would do anything to defend his tribe and his own did not stand in support with him. He became an obsolete object. Although he was exiled for an accidental kill of a tribesman, he had no resentment against the law of his village. Even though he was the strongest man entitled and stood in a fight for the law of his village this law showed no mercy when he himself was the victim. Despite such stern verdict, an exile did not weaken him but endured those years in exile to get back to his own people anticipating to bring back the same glory once they cherished. This inextricable law could have been abolished if Okonkwo himself had stood against the call of the Hills and Caves when Ikemefuna was sentenced to death as the only reason to bring back the fertility of the land was

nothing but naive primitive beliefs. Why would Okonkwo not think even for a moment that, why would their ancestral gods would demand such innocent blood? If bravery and courage are what defines the man of Umoufeia then why would the Oracle of the Hills and Caves not see this brevity of an innocent child as an exceptional offering? A protagonist is a man of war, a man of fearless courage but he is a man of indifference, a man of apathetic. His lack of curiosity has made him a perfect tragic hero. His flaw is his inability to question against the Oracle of the Hills and Caves made him lose his own identity. Neither did he show any inquisitiveness when the White arrived with a new governmental system and a new belief. No wonder Okonkwo is implacable, stubborn in his pursuit. This nature of him could have turned out to his advantage, he might not be primitive Okonkwo but evolved Okonkwo. A man of curiosity and a man of reasoning, rational and thinking man. The driving fact is that those who have not learned to adapt, acclimatise according to the changing need of time, have never been able to survive. "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection" written by Charles Darwin, the hypothesis is the survival of the fittest. If the protagonist knew that gone are the days of machetes and dawn of rationality had begun, he would have passed the ideal deception of any irrational beliefs passed down by the ancestral. Strength necessarily should not imply physical power, but the emotion and psychological temperament which the protagonist did not inculcate as a child. His anger resulted in domestic violence upon his wives and kids, to which the protagonist thought was the masculine figure to dictate them and the proper manner of existence. A way for their wives to live and for their kids to become anticipated masculine and feminine figures. The delusion of considering his world as axiomatic, Okonkwo lost his reasoning sense to adapt to survive. Infact, it was a kind of fight that the protagonist was not familiar with. A fight against the whole community of western colonization

Conclusion

The belief and the idea of how women and men should perform their roles in any existing structure of society. The nature of both men and women, the dispositions were at their most predestined even before a child is born. In most societies, we have anticipated certain modes of behaviour and development. In the course of the development of human stages, a child is expected to inculcate such modes of behaviour to fit the culture of any ethnic group. Comparison can also be made based on the fact that it is the culture and ethos of any existing ethnic society that affects the roles of a man and a woman. In *Things Fall Apart*, the expected masculine figure was already embedded in their culture and belief. To which the protagonist is

the result of stigmatization of how shameful it would be to appear weak. Nwoye was beaten heavily over the melancholy expression that Ikemefia would be killed. Okonkwwo reckoned this as the nature of a woman and he did not demand of Nwoye to sway by such an outbreak of melancholic emotion. If the protagonist had debated against such norms, that was against the instinct of human nature the aftermath outcome would have been different. It was the rigid and unreformed, uninformed beliefs that drove the protagonist into his own misfortune. Some of the elders seemed to have tried to engage themselves in thinking, but the protagonist could never get out of his surpassing world of entitlement as a warrior and as a fearless man of Umuofia. Thus, the readers are left with pity and poignant at the fate of Okonkwwo. A confounding tragic hero battling against the confounded masculine figure.

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