

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Tragic fall of the protagonist Okonkwoin ‘*Things Fall Apart*’ by Chinua Achebe

Mr. R. Gobinath

Assistant Professor,

PG Department of English,

Kongunadu Arts and Science College.Coimbatore-29

Abstract: Chinua Achebe (born 1930) is one of the foremost Nigerian novelists, these novels are primarily directed to an African audience, but their psychological insights have gained them universal acceptance. *Things Fall Apart* is the debut novel by Chinua Achebe, first published in 1958. It showcases pre-colonial life in the southeastern part of Nigeria and the arrival of Europeans during the late 19th century. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, and one of the first to receive global critical acclaim. This paper focuses on the Tragic fall of the protagonist named Okonkwo, where the protagonist is psychologically stubborn in the acceptance of the new cultures.

Keywords: culture, psychology , novelist , universal.

The novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is a story that opens the Reader’s mind to an entirely different way of living in a Nigerian village. Achebe was in Nigeria in 1930, perhaps this is why he writes a whole book on a Nigerian village and introduces to us the ways of life for the

Nigerian people. From the first page of the book to the last, Achebe allows the reader to enter the mind of the main character Okonkwo. Okonkwo is the leader of his village and is much respected for his many achievements. Although Okonkwo means well for his village, the novel invites the reader to see him has a flawed character who eventually suffers from the consequences of bad “masculine” decisions he makes throughout the book.

Okonkwo is known throughout Umuofia to be extremely masculine. He rarely shows Signs of fear or weakness. This is because Oknokwo promised himself he would be the complete opposite of his father Unoka. Unoka had passed away ten Years prior to when the story takes place but he has always been remembered as a weak, lazy, poor man who could barely provide for his family He was al in debt and didn’t care to work, he would play his flute all day everyday was able to. “People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back” (5). Unoka was the laugh of the town and Okonkwo would never allow himself be

RESEARCH ARTICLE

that. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo does many things to prove his masculine quality. Many of these things are debatable as to whether they affirm Okonkwo's masculinity or if they bring out his true weakness and lead to his destruction.

One thing that Okonkwo repeatedly does throughout the novel is beat his wives. Within the Nigerian culture, some say that this is what a real man does, but argue that Okonkwo beats them because he IS truly weak at heart.

Okonkwo never really has a 'legitimate' reason as to why he beats his Wives. It begins early in the book, in chapter four, when we experience the outcome of Okonkwo's "manly" side. Okonkwo is furious with his youngest wife Ojiugo his afternoon meal IS not prepared for him. He IS even more angered when he finds out she went to braid her hair at her friend's house. Okonkwo wats In his obi, the living quarters of the head of the family in the village, for the return of his wife. When Ojiugo finally comes home, she is greeted with a harsh beating by Okonkwo. It just so happens that this incident occurred during the week of Peace but this surely did not stop Okonkwo from beating his wife. Okonkwo ended up suffering for what he did. Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess Ani, met with Okonkwo to discuss his actions. He said to him "the evil you 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" (30-31) One would think this consequence would change Okonkwo's mind about beating his wives, but that of course is not the case.

Okon kwo's second wife was rewarded with a beating by Okonkwo when she cuts leaves of a banana tree. Okonkwo over exaggerated about the condition of a banana tree and took his anger out on his second wife. He gave her a beating and walked away satisfied. I his next plan was to go hunting and when he asked Ikemefuna to fetch his gun, the wife who had just been beaten mumbled something and unfortunately for her, Okonkwo heard her. He proceeded into his room where he got his loaded gun and aimed It at his Wife. [here was a loud noise that (Goldman 3) left his wile luckily unhurt, but very frightened "He heaved a heaved a heavy sigh and went away with the gun (39) Okonkwo feeling no shame what he did definitely foreshadowed his heartless manly' actions that would lead him down the pathway to misery further into the book Anyone who cannot accept the actions of others and shows It so violently, is obviously going to end up miserable by themselves only does Okonkwo beat his wives, he beats his son Nwoye as well. Because he fears weakness, Okonkwo is very demanding of his family. He seems to think his son is more like a woman than a man and finds him to be very

RESEARCH ARTICLE

lazy. Nwoye resembles his grandfather and that is something Okonkwo Cannot deal with. On numerous occasions Okonkwo would hit his son and if Nwoye was lucky, he would just be threatened. One day, Nwoye was cutting up yams and Okonkwo was upset with the size of the pieces. He said to his son “if you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw” (32). This “masculine” behavior of Okonkwo truly begins to reveal a tragic character flaw.

Further into the book Okonkwo’s masculine behavior really becomes outrageous when he takes the life of a young boy, who is like his surrogate son. Ikemefuna is a boy from a neighboring clan who was sent to live with Okonkwo for three years because his father had killed a daughter of Umuofia. During those three years a strong relationship was built between the two of them, but of course Okonkwo showed no affection. Okonkwo would consider himself weak and a failure if he did so, so his only emotion would be anger. “His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness” (13). This fear prevented Okonkwo from opening up to others, especially his family, and accepting reality. He believed his manly’ ideas of what should be done in the village were what all the villagers should think. Surprisingly though there were (Goldman 4) that Okonkwo allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him to feasts, like a son, and

Ikemefuna did call Okonkwo father. In chapter seven, Okonkwo learns that Umuofia is the one who breaks the news to Okonkwo. He also tells Okonkwo that since Ikemefuna calls him father he must not take any part in his murder.

Obviously, Okonkwo would not listen to Ezeudu’s orders. Okonkwo went along with a group of elders through the forest where they were leading Ikemefuna to his Death. When the was right, one of the elders drew his and Okonkwo looked away. Ikemefuna fell to the ground and yelled father, they have killed me!” (61). Once again, being afraid of being thought as a weak nun, Okonkwo draws his own Machete and cuts the boy ending his life.

The final incident that makes Okonkwo suffer most occurs during Ezeudu’s funeral. Ezeudu was very much respected in the village and so all of the clan attended his funeral. The service was unlike all others because the “one-handed spirit” made an appearance. I-le made his way over to Ezeudu ‘s body and spoke:

If your death was the death of nature, go in peace. But if a man caused it. Do not allow him a moment’s rest (123). All of a sudden, the most bizarre thing happened. There were cries and shouts of horror. It was as if the one-handed spirit had cast a spell on Okonkwo before he left. In the center of the cluster of people laid the

RESEARCH ARTICLE

dead body of Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son. It just so happens that Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had event through the boy's heart. Everyone was confused. Deaths were common in the village but nothing of this nature had ever happened. This incident was definitely meant to happen so Okonkwo's life would be ruined. It was as if he was being punished for all the harsh things he had done to people in the past, like his wives and son. It is from here on out that we see (Goldman 5) the life of Okonkwo goes downhill.

Okonkwo would come face to face with his fear. His dream of becoming one of the lords of the clan was shattered. He had to flee from the clan for seven Years. How could a strong, brave warrior like Okonkwo be humiliated with such a consequence? He had no choice though. That night he gathered his belongings and him and his family set out to seek refuge in his motherland. During Okonkwo's absence from Umuofia, many things went on that Okonkwo would never have thought would happen. White man came to Umuofia. After two years of Okonkwo being in exile, Obierka had went to visit Okonkwo and told him stories about was going on back in the village. He told him that a group of white man had destroyed a called Abame and almost everybody in it. Two years after this, Obierka returned with even worse news. White missionaries had now settled

in Umuofia have known this was going to happen. He treated Nwoye with no respect and looked down upon him they' built a church there and had many villagers' followings use than that, Obierka told Okonkwo that Nwoye was indeed one of the converts. Okonkwo wished to not speak about it. Okonkwo had to. He showed him no affection what-so-ever.

Okonkwo could not do anything about the white men. He was miles away from Umuofia and still had a few years left before he could return. For once, he unable to make "masculine moves" and take charge. If only he knew to the extent what was really going on in his village. The white men were spreading Christianity all over. They were getting the villagers to break their tradition, escape their culture, and believe their gods were dead. They even demanded that the villagers attend church every seventh day to worship their god. They destroying the Evil Forest and building houses for themselves. Surprisingly, no one was stopping them. It was (Goldman 6) as if the villagers did not care that their lives were being taken over and would soon be changed forever. By the time Okonkwo would return, everything would be different.

He gathered his clansmen in the marketplace and to his surprise they listened with respect. Although they did not agree to kill the missionary or turn against

RESEARCH ARTICLE

the Christians like Okonkwo wanted, they agreed they would do something. For the next few days, the men in Umuofia went about their business armed with Weapons. They promised Okonkwo they would not be naïve and unaware like the men in Abame. Then one day the District Commissioner returned to Umufoia from his tour. He sent his messenger to the leaders of Umuofia to tell them to meet him in this headquarters to chat. Obviously, Okonkwo was among one of the six leaders.

Okonkwo demanded that the other leaders be aimed and ready for anything. He told them “an Umuofia man does not refuse a call. He may refuse to do what he is asked, he does not refuse to be asked” (193). It is clear here that the only thoughts running through his head were masculine thoughts. He needed to show the men that he was not afraid and he would be willing to go to war even if they were not. They six of them did as what they were asked and went to the Goldman 7 courthouse where the District Commissioner was waiting. He told them the reason he had gathered them was because he wanted to discuss things that happened while he was gone. Without further a due, he surprised the six leaders with appearances from his own men and before anyone can do anything, Okonkwo and his friends were handcuffed and led into guardroom. Although the court messengers were told to treat the six of them with respect they did not. For the next

few days the men were deprived of food and water.

Okonkwo consistently told the men “we should have killed the white man (195) and finally they got up with what was going on that they agreed with It is him. It is unfortunate though that Okonkwo only wanted to kill the white man because he was afraid, they would succeed in changing the traditions of Umuofia. Maybe if Okonkwo was willing to accept change, the six of them not have been locked up like criminals. Days after, the messengers were going into town and telling the people of Umuofia that their leaders would not be released until they paid a fine of 250 bags of cowries.

The news spread quickly throughout the village. One night the village crier beat his instrument and called every man of Umuofia to a meeting in the marketplace. After the meeting, the men of Umuofia decided to collect the 250 bags of cowries to give to the white men. The men were pleased and set the six men free. The next day there was another meeting, this time with the six leaders. Okonkwo didn't sleep that night. All he thought about was revenge. He couldn't believe how him and his men were treated by the white men. If Umuofia decided to go to war, he would be very happy. But if not, he would take things into hisOwn hands and go to war alone, like any ‘real man’ would do.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Morning came and the marketplace was filled with the non-converts. The first person to speak was Okika, one of the leaders locked up by the white men. He told the listeners that they Goldman 8 must go to war even though some of the strangers they would be fighting might perhaps be their own kind. He says “we must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil, we must root them out too” (204). It is unfortunate that the villagers were turning on one another. At this point, everyone became silent. Out of nowhere appeared five court messengers.

Okonkwo was very close to them. He immediately stood up he saw then and greeted the head messenger with feelings of strong hatred. The messenger told Okonkwo that the white men wanted the meeting to seconds, Okonkwo drew his machete, cut the messenger’s head off, walked away. That was the last time anyone would Okonkwo. He took his own life and hung his lifeless body to a tree can one be sympathetic to the plight of Okonkwo? His obsession with his masculine side made him suffer. He did it to himself. If he wasn’t so caught up the idea that if you weren’t violent and brave then you were a woman perhaps, he would still be alive at the end of the novel. He takes his own life because he realizes everything, he has done to be that powerful leader he has always wanted to be was a waste. When he comes back from

exile, everything is different. He realizes that the people in the village don’t need him They are content with change and adapting to a new way of life, unlike himself They don’t want to go to war and have bloody battles like he does. Okonkwo realized his village was able to survive without him. By Okonkwo taking his own life, he proved his misery and the idea of him being truly weak at heart were affirmed.

The coming of the white man affects the people of Umuofia’s religion and cause culture conflict. The people of Umuofia have many gods. Agbala- the oracle of the Hills and Caves. “People come from far and near to consult it” 12). People consult it when they have dispute with their neighbors and also, they can discover what their future held for them from this god. Chi is also a personal god which judge people by the work of their hands. They also believed that if they say yes That their chi also says yes. The people of Umuofia are very obedient to their gods. They go to war without consulting their gods.

The religion of the people of Umuofia is totally different from the lute man’s religion. This situation caused a culture conflict between the white man and the people of Umuofia. The white man wants to impose his religion on the people of Umuofia. The white man believes in one God which he believes to made heaven and earth. Also said his God made the entire

RESEARCH ARTICLE

world and the Umuofia's gods. He wanted the people of Umuofia to abandon their gods and follow his own religion. The white men belittle the people of Umuofia's gods by saying different things about their gods. The white men say that the people of Umuofia's god are gods of deceit who tell them to kill their fellow and destroy Innocent children. The white man says that their gods are not alive and cannot do them harm and that they are made of piece of wood and stone. Hearing and seeing all these from the white man, the people of Umuofia were not happy with the white man's religion which was a reason for a culture conflict. The economy of the people of Umuofia was out in conflict with the white man's economy. Agriculture is the source of living in Umuofia. People's riches are based on the number of barns they have. People really work hard on their farm harvest. 130th children and wives help on the farm to plant yams. The people of Umuofia have a very good scene of agriculture. For instance, during the planting season, Okonkwo planted his yam from the Smoldering earth by making rings of thick sisal leaves around them. This yam is So precious to them that they celebrate a Fest of the New Year which was held every year before the harvest began to honor the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. On the other hand, the white man was more interested in making money. They the farming worthless because their convert can use moneyTo buy the yams. Children no

longer farm; they go to school which was built by theWhite man. "The white man has also brought a government and a system of running it" (154). They also brought their own trade. These cause a cultureConflict because the Umuofia's economic value was disvalued. The white man set his own economy above their cash crop; thereby reducing them to poverty. Rich people were reduced to poor, everything they work very hard for ill be bought with money.

The tragedy is that Okonkwo, the tragic hero, suffers a downfall and ends up killing himself. Even though his downfall could have been averted, the white missionaries are the main cause of Okonkwo's tragedy. What is a tragedy? A tragedy has to have a tragic hero who suffers a downfall and has a tragic resolution. In Things Fall Apart, the tragedy is that the tragic hero, suffers a downfall and ends up killing himself. Even though his downfall could have been averted, the white missionaries are the main cause of Okonkwo's tragedy.

At first everything was fine. Umuofia had its own culture and its own beliefs. Okonkwo was one of the strongest men of Umuofia. Okonkwo was masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy. He didn't want to be like his father, in other a failure. He considered his father a failure because he was very lazy Ignominious, and poor. Okonkwo believed that every man

RESEARCH ARTICLE

should have power and that they shouldn't show any affection to others otherwise they would have been called women.

The tragedy begins when Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills Ogbuefi Ezedu's son. Because of that, Okonkwo take this family into exile for seven years. Soon afterward, white missionaries arrive to Umuofia. "The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them" (Achebe 138). "It said that other white men were in their way" (Achebe 138). These two quotes foreshadow that the white men will come and spread destruction around Umuofia causing the clan to become weak.

And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roots and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown-earth color of the vast, hungry swarm" (Achebe 56). This quote shows that the locusts, which symbolize the white men, are so heavy they break the tree branches. The branches are symbols of the traditions and cultural roots of Igbo society, which can no longer survive under the onslaught of white settlement. The whites started spreading their faith and sharing their beliefs all around Umuofia. They told all the people of the Igbo culture that their religion was bad

because they worshipped many gods and that caught the people's attention, therefore all the people wanted to be like them. Mostly all the people were against the Igbo culture, even Okonkwo's son Nwoye. "But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe 176). The clan starts losing control and becomes very weak due to the settlement of the white men. Okonkwo sees that his used to be strong, clan becomes very weak that they can't control their people anymore. After realizing that everything Umuofia used to be had fallen apart and that he couldn't do anything to prevent It, he commits suicide.

Though the white missionaries canoe and changed everything around Umuofia, Okonkwo's fall could have been averted. If his clan wouldn't have become weak, Okonkwo wouldn't have committed suicide. If they would of e Supported Okonkwo and become strong again, they would have prevented hits from staying in Umuofia and destroying it. Another way that Okonkwo's fall could have been averted was to join the whites. If he had joined the whites maybe his life wouldn't have had a tragic ending. As a result, Okonkwo's tragedy was due to many things that happened in Umuofia, but the main

RESEARCH ARTICLE

reason was the arrival of the white missionaries because when they came, everything fell apart.

References

Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. New York: Anchor, 1994. Print.

"Ibos People." Africa Guide. N.p., n.d. Web. 01 Feb. 2015.

Nairaland February 11, 2015, from <http://www.nairaland.com/1005808/igboarchitecture-ulo-ome-nigbo>

Shmoop Editorial Team. "Things Fall Apart." Shmoop.com. Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 05 Feb. 2015.

"Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe Study Help Full Glossary for Things Fall Apart." Full Glossary for Things Fall Apart. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Feb. 2015.