



## **A Cultural Critique of Chinua Achebe's Book "Things Fall Apart": The Igbo Ethnic Group's Excessive Desire for Materialism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This work is an attempt to review one of the masterpieces of African literature, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. From an African perspective, I will rely on cultural criticism to offer a conventional interdisciplinary enquiry into the work that has been widely acclaimed as a classic. I will then proceed to deconstruct them in such a way that it will give a guide on what the interplays were that acted on the prime character, Okonkwo; how the societal values, in this case, achievement, wealth, and materialism, acted as catalysts and baits that drew him to his tragic end. I will not fail to reflect on how the *Umuofia* society in which he lived in *Things Fall Apart* was organised and how it reflects the ideals upon which Igbo society generally is built and the values they hold dear. This allows me to gain some insight into the social, political, psychological, and historical conflict, dissent, and contradictions that influenced Okonkwo by providing these structures of meaning with relevant assumptions that have objective representations. I discovered that the invasion and forceful change of the cultural perspective of Chinua Achebe's *Umuofia* came to light because the colonialists had also brought a government and a system of running it; schools, trading, and government reinforced each other and combined to undo the old order. I further argued that Okonkwo's excessive quest for wealth reflects ills from the Igbo culture, which has ultimately extended to all of Nigeria in recent times.

**Keywords:** Cultural criticism; psychological; social and historical assumptions; conflicts; struggle.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Things Fall Apart* is an admixture of power play, prestige, and cultural dynamism in *Umuofia*, a serene community in the Igboland of Eastern Nigeria, before the advent of British colonialists into Africa. The novel revolves around Okonkwo, the hero and major protagonist, who, driven by the fear of failure like his father, is like one under a spell to

uphold and protect his hard-earned wealth and name, gets caught in the dance of fate (Tabassum, 2017). It is this Okonkwo's passion to become one of the lords of the clan, and the violent and wild disruption of the serene way of life and culture of the traditional Igbo culture, and indeed, all African communities by the invasion and take-over of the communities by the English colonialists, that caused irreconcilable distortions and strangulations to the old way of life (George, 2020). The differences caused by new words, new usages, and new applications of the otherwise ancient and ordered way of life that entered into men's heads and hearts, and thence, the old society simply gave way under its heavy load and simply fell apart.

I will examine Okonkwo's society as presented to us in *Things Fall Apart* based on the books perception of "Umuofia," how its culture transcends disciplinary boundaries and disdain for moral tags to wealth accumulation and success, hence lacking in methodological uniformity. With the background knowledge that literary criticism is akin to a surgical autopsy, I will then proceed to expose the work towards producing an interpretation that seeks to understand how Chinua Achebe got his ideas together, how the work displays the aesthetically relevant features, and how these features are to be grasped and evaluated in the light of their distinctive essences (Howell, 2002).

A cultural criticism and evaluation studies of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reveals a heartwarming and radiant package of the following: Achievement and Ascription; Masculinity and Manhood; Power; Justice and Universalism: dispute resolution and clan justice system; Religiosity and devotions to ancestor worship; Communalism and collectivism; War; Uncertainty Avoidance; Womanhood and Feminism; Right to Property and Wealth Ownership; and Marriage and family affiliations. I will provide ample opportunity to expound on each of the above with time, but suffice it to say that we will give a full enunciation of the issues that are connected with achievement and masculinity or manhood in *Things Fall Apart*.

### **THE INSTITUTION OF ACHIEVEMENT AS THE ULTIMATE VALUE IN THINGS FALL APART**

The colours and cultural methodology with which *Things Fall Apart* is layered and set out are achievement and materialism. Achievement is the central and ultimate value. It is the only measuring standard made dense with cultural nuances and evocations that determines where the hand of power and influence should fall. Shuffling along with achievement, one finds a thick foliage of ascription, masculinity, and power. Achievement, therefore, is what takes men to the pinnacle of honour and adoration, and it is to its wings that all men wish to ascend so as to fly. *Things Fall Apart* opens with the sensational statement, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen, he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (Achebe 1984, p. 3). This assertion, given its urgency and force, makes "achievement" not only the central theme, but the ultimate theme of *Things Fall Apart*. It also celebrates, idolizes, and glorifies masculinity and manhood at the same time. This is a big chunk of John Locke's political philosophy because Locke holds that no man is expected to hand over his natural rights to the state, not even to the community (Appadorai, 2004). This explains why Locke (1963) argued that:

Though the Earth, and all inferior Creatures be common to all Men, yet every Man has a *Property* in his own *Person*. This no Body has any

Right to but himself. The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, hath by this *labour* something annexed to it, that excludes the common right of other Men. For this *Labour* being the unquestionable Property of the Labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joyned to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others (p. 116).

My understanding of the above, therefore, is that Igbo society, being predominantly acephalous in nature, engenders the unhealthy physical exertion of as much energy and power as possible. This aspect of Igbo society is responsible for innovativeness, progressiveness, and resourcefulness, but it does not prove healthy for the existence of an egalitarian society. Not very long after partially introducing Okonkwo's greatness, on page 5 of the book (*Things Fall Apart*), Okoye was introduced as follows: "Okoye was a musician." He played on the *Ogene*. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and three wives. And now he was going to take the *Idemili* title, the third highest in the land. It was a very expensive ceremony, and he was gathering all his resources together. This actually served to sway attention from Okonkwo briefly, but it succeeded in impacting the way people consider and rate personal achievements, akin to Thomas Hobbes' "state of nature." of everyone against everyone.

In *Things Fall Apart*, it is located within the context of personal exertion and individual struggle. Interestingly, chapter one ended with the statement that "Fortunately, among these people, a man was judged according to his worth" (p. 6). Okonkwo was clearly cut out for great things. He was still young, but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams. He had just married his third wife. To crown it all, he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two intertribal wars. And so, though Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders say, if a child washes his hands well, he could eat with kings (Achebe, 1984). This especially re-echoes Chodat's claim that novels are like "styles of thought pervading an entire culture" (Carroll & Gibson, 2016, p. 91).

The book's initial pages detail the meeting at the clan, which was held at the market-place to discuss the murder of the wife of Ogbuefi Udo, an aspect of a script written in celebration of masculinity and manhood. Due to their sensitive nature, women were not allowed to attend such meetings. The attendance was overwhelming, such that it was reported that "there must have been about ten thousand men there, all talking in low tones" (Achebe, 1984, p. 8). The same show of masculinity accounted for why Ogbuefi Ezeudo, "a powerful orator," someone who can move people to act or refuse to act in a particular way, was chosen to speak on such occasions. As he bellowed his greeting, "Umuofakwenu," the crowd of over ten thousand men answered with a thunderous reply, "Yaa" (Achebe, 1984, p. 8). The artistic connectivity and logical relational sequence put to use by the writer are brought to bear by introducing Okonkwo's masculinity, in how he maturely rules his entire family. He was described as follows: Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the

youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did the children. Although Okonkwo was quick to express his anger, we are let into the soft side of him, for “perhaps down in his heart, Okonkwo was not a cruel man.” This is repeated on page 20, where Okonkwo is said to have become fond of the boy, Ikemefuna, but he did not show it openly because, according to him, showing affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength (Achebe, 1984).

A further celebration of manhood is found in the subsumed capacity and capability to withstand the vicissitudes of life with equanimity, to be in control of his emotions and bear the affliction with self-composure. Here Okonkwo is compared with the Biblical Job (Job 1: 20-22; KJV), who acknowledged that “If we are impoverished, we are not wronged, nor much hurt, for we are as we were born.” Okonkwo was quite hopeful, despite the fact that the year appeared to have “gone mad.” He must have looked beyond that particular year to the previous years. In the past year, the harvest was terrible and misery spread around as many farmers dug up miserable and rotten yams, but Okonkwo didn’t sink under the load of despair. In the midst of this calamity, a certain Unoka’s father told him during the terrible months of bad harvest: “Do not despair. I know you will not despair. You have a manly and proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because a general failure does not prick his pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone” (Achebe 1984, p. 18). It was Okonkwo’s ego, his self-pride, that made him keep his head above the waters that sought to drown him. Masculinity is equally highlighted when yam is called “the king of crops” and said to be “a very exacting king.” The manliness and masculinity of yam are brought about by how rigorous and intense the attention required to make it productive was. Minimally, for three or four moons, it needed constant devotion and continuous work from morning to sunset. The young tendrils have to be protected from the scorching heat of the sun soon after they are planted. The yam’s growing tendrils were staked twice, first with smaller and later with bigger sticks, and had to be weeded three times before the heavy rains would come. This is why it gets the title of “King of crops.”

Okafo ascended to the sphere of greatness in the same way that Okonkwo rose to stardom through wrestling. Okafo achieved the feat when he threw Ikezue in a wrestling contest. By throwing Ikezue, Okafo was inducted into the Clan’s Hall of Fame in this instance through singing songs in his praise around the community. He was thenceforth heralded as the man who had thrown four hundred men and a hundred cats and that he had become the choice of everyone to wrestle in external contests on behalf of the village. To endorse this, Okonkwo’s showed up equally extolling the strength and resilience of masculinity as he inwardly admired his son Nwoye for being interested in doing masculine jobs for his father’s wives, like splitting fire wood and pounding *foofoo* (a typical food in Nigeria). Okonkwo also liked him, especially when he feigned annoyance and grumbled about “women and their troubles.” Okonkwo wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his household because, as he rightly reminisced, “No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children (and especially women), he was not really a man” (Achebe, 1984, p. 37).

Although one of the elders (unnamed) warned, “He whose palm kernel was cracked for him by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble” (Achebe 1984, p. 19). This proverb was not to disparage or denigrate Okonkwo’s greatness or achievement; it rose out of dislike for his “brusqueness in dealing with less successful men” (Achebe 1984, p. 19) and intended to call him to order. This did not help in

bringing Okonkwo to his senses, which is why he continued to throw tantrums and to act wildly, even at his expense. Okonkwo had cracked his palm kernels by himself. He had put up a grim struggle against poverty and misfortune, so if any man deserved to be successful, then Okonkwo should be in the lead of those people. When he was considered from the point of view of his wrestling feats and his struggles against poverty and weakness, then obviously, “Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his chi agreed.” Not only his chi, but also his clan, because a man was judged by his work” (Achebe 1984, p. 19). This accounts for why Okonkwo’s sudden growth and rise from poverty to greatness is believed to have gone into Okonkwo’s head.

In chapter eight of *Things falls apart*, it is observed the altruism of the old African adage, “the evil that men do lives after them” (p. 8), being fulfilled as the particularly reprehensible act of murdering their stepson began to take its high toll on Okonkwo. First, he lost his appetite for two days. Also, he could not sleep at night, and on the heels of this, he “felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito. Now and then, a cold shiver descended on his head and spread down his body (Achebe 1984, p. 44), and then whenever his mind went to *Ikemefuna*, his dead son, he shivered. Okonkwo was going insane, feeling hugely berserk and hysterical. He was forced to introspectively ask himself what was going wrong with him. It was interesting and impressive that he could look back over his shoulder and seek to understand himself. According to the book, Okonkwo, he tried to console himself by asking, When did you become a shivering old woman, and are you known in all nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he added a boy to their number? This shows the immoral actions during the pre-colonial times.

One of the major events in Chapter Nine is the celebration of Okonkwo’s first wife after she gave birth to her third child. It was no mean achievement because, after she gave birth to her third son in succession, “Okonkwo had slaughtered a goat for her, as was the custom” (Achebe, 1984, p. 56). It was celebrated with a great feast, merriment, and music. This springs from the fact that in Africa, male children are accorded a higher preference; hence, the mothers are celebrated upon giving birth to the third son, emphasising the irrevocable birth of worthy heirs apparent. The husbands are happy that they are guaranteed the presence of the man who will inherit their wealth or estate. This introduces a parallel ceremony, which serves to demonstrate manhood or masculinity.

Furthermore, in page 62 of the book, *Things Fall Apart*, masculinity is heralded in several events. Achebe (1984) states that “It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men” (p. 62). There were many women, but they looked on from the fringes like outsiders. The titled men and the elderly sat on their stools, waiting for the trials to begin. The above statement illustrates the prime importance and utmost respect given to masculinity and the celebration of manhood, although there are other times when feminism and womanhood are celebrated, as in Chapter Eight. The membership and attendance by the community for this event sets it apart as a male-dominated affair. At times, the “high-pitched blast,” “guttural and awesome” voices and occasional movement and stampede by any of the *egwugwu* (a masquerader who impersonates one of the ancestral spirits of the village) towards the women caused them to flee away in panic, but not the men, who made it a primarily male chauvinistic affair. In fact, the other masculine event that surrounded the *egwugwu* was their house, which was a no-go area for the women. Women were regularly drafted to paint patterns and

draw on the outside of the *egwugwu* house, but “these women never saw the inside of the hut” (p. 63). No woman ever did. “They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. If they imagined what was inside, they kept it to themselves. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and most secret cult in the clan.” This makes the *egwugwu* cult the epitome of masculinity, manhood, and power in the land.

This now brings me to one of the strangest instances where manhood and masculinity were celebrated in *Things Fall Apart*. This simply refers to the case of masculinizing a woman, Chielo, the Priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. In Chapter Eleven of *Things Fall Apart*, the Priestess Chielo comes to Okonkwo’s house to carry Ezinma, the daughter and only child of Ekwefi, Okonkwo’s third wife. The Priestess told Okonkwo and his wife that “Agbala wants to see her (Ezinma)” (Achebe 1984). In response to this request, Ekwefi said that she would go with her. The Priestess turned it down and warned her, saying, “How dare you, woman, to go before the mighty Agbala of your own accord? Beware, woman, lest he strike you in his anger” (Cited in Viswas, 2000, p. 41). At this point, it is interesting to point out that from the comments issuing from Chielo, she did not take herself at that moment to be a woman. After the Priestess had gone forth with Ezinma, Chielo the Priestess moved with the agility and strength that only a man could muster, hence Ekwefi was so amazed that she asked, “How could she go so fast with Ezinma on her back?” It was estimated that the journey had taken the Priestess round the entire nine villages, and it only took how weak and worn out she became to realise that she had reached Umuachi, the farthest village in the Umuofia clan. This is why Ekwefi exclaimed, “It was unbelievable the distance they had covered.” The dexterity and power displayed all dawned on Ekwefi, who agreed that “It was not the same Chielo who sat with her in the market...” It was a different woman—the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves... How a woman could carry a child of that size so easily and for so long was a miracle. Chielo was not a woman that night, but this Chielo had the manly part of her, or simply, she was a man (Achebe 1984, pp. 72–75).

This is a very unique case of celebrating masculinity. Ekwefi knew that although Chielowas was a priestess of a male “god,” as a woman, Chielo did not and could not do the things she did that night all by herself with the strength of a woman. She saw on display the manly traits of endurance, power, fearlessness, independence, strength, courage, leadership and assertiveness. This is known to be sharply contrasted with the picture of the real Chielo, who buys from the market and the woman whom she saw in Obierika’s compound on the day of marriage when a cow was let loose by its owner, wherein she advised, “We cannot all rush out like that, leaving what we are cooking to burn in the fire; three or four of us should stay behind.” Achebe (1984, p. 80). The celebration of Chielo, the Priestess of the Hills and Caves, is the celebration of masculinity and manhood.

There was an open endorsement of achievement on page 82 of *Things Fall Apart* when the young men began to sing songs to eulogise each of the elderly people who were seated in a circle at Akueke’s marriage ceremony. It was reported that the singers “had something to say for every man. Some were great farmers, some were clan orators, and Okonkwo was the greatest wrestler and warrior alive (Achebe, 1984). Okonkwo’s name was a recurrent factor in Umuofia, and nothing done was complete without adding his name. All this stems from the high premium placed on achievement and the wealth that

one has. This brief impression given to readers says volumes about how achievement and materialism are regarded and what it means to an Umuofia person and his culture. It means that even at informal meetings like marriages, achievement still determines so much of what is expected and what is eventually done.

In Chapter Thirteen, page 84 of *Things Fall Apart*, where the death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, one of the greatest men of Umuofa, was announced by the esoteric language of the *ekwe*, the language that resonates is one of achievement at its retirement. We are told, Ezeudu was a great man, and so all the clan were at his funeral. The ancient drums of death beat, guns and cannons were fired, and men dashed about in a frenzy, cutting down every tree or animal they saw, jumping over walls and dancing on the roof. It was a warrior's funeral, and from morning till night, warriors came and went in their age-groups. It was a great funeral, such as befitted a warrior.

As Christianity became an alternative way of life for the people of Umuofia and Mbanta, the inhabitants were confronted with an incidental and emergent phase of achievement that opened to those who accepted the new Christian faith. According to the story, the majority of Christian converts were men "whose word(s) were heeded in the assembly of the people" (p. 101). They were mostly the kinds of people that were called "efulefu," or "worthless, empty men." An *efulefu* man was someone who sold his matchet and wore the empty scabbard to the war front. The said description failed to account for the worth of a man who is bereft of an idea of his wealth and achievements, since it portrays the man's poverty level, one that "sold" means he sold that to satisfy a higher need, hunger. That he came to the war front without a matchet does not demean him because there certainly are other ways to fight and defeat one's enemy in the battle field. What kind of man can overpower, disarm, and discomfit his opponents and take their match? The new faith adherers were likened by the powerful class of the Umuofia community to "mad dogs" that had come to devour the clan's excrement.

But for the Christians, the case is totally different. They have gotten a new lease on life and an experience that their traditional and cultural affiliations could not afford. It was something that transcended the materialistic achievement and wealth on which the power base of society depended, which was based on how many yam barns one had, how many titles one had, and which secret cults one belonged to. It was freedom, liberty, a recondite feeling of release, the realisation of their human dignity and fellow-feeling. On a personal level, for instance, for Nwoye, it was the ultimate answer to his long search for answers and a fuller understanding of life's riddles and of life itself. Nwoye has since been trussed to the great vice and festering decay of culture and tradition, and is silently looking for emancipation and liberation. So it was an immeasurable achievement that, with Christianity, Nwoye was at liberty to enjoy a flourishing life of freedom and goodwill, never to be taunted by devils and spirits who seemed to chase him about like ghosts (Umezurike, 2021). He therefore cherished his new-found liberty in the Christian faith so that those that the community called nonentities and *efulefus* saw themselves as sons and children of God. This was especially true for the Church's acceptance and elevation of the downtrodden and poor, such as twins, mothers of twins, and "osus." The Church told them that they were now free because Jesus Christ had set them free and that they were equal with every other person in the community.

It is also remarkable that the Christian Church accepted women such as Nneka, whose previous four pregnancies were thrown into the evil forest simply because they were a set of twins. What evil did they commit? This was not a problem that was

restricted to the Igbos because even in Cross Rivers and Akwa-Ibom States, the same practice was said to have been carried out on innocent children and their mothers until Mary Slessor came to Calabar and halted that evil practice (Akpabio, 2021). The “Osus” must be the happiest of all those who have accepted the Christian faith because they were said to be “dedicated to a god, a thing set apart—taboo forever and his children after him.” “He could neither marry nor be married to a freeborn” (Achebe, 1984, p. 111). An *osu* was forced to perpetually live in a special part of the village, in an area near the Great Shrine, and their hair was never cut for any reason whatsoever. The church had their long tangled hairs cut, their clothes changed, and while the community told them they would die, they did not die (). In this case, if it took the arrival of a new religion to assure these people, long bound by tradition and culture, that they would be declared free, what could one expect from those who had long despaired, burdened, and yearned for liberty? Why wouldn’t these people readily condemn and curse the gods of their fathers and ancestors because all they seemed to have brought to them was pain and curse? These are the ones that, in the words of Okonkwo, wouldn’t hesitate to “abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens” (Achebe 1984, p. 108). This was a newfound definition of achievement and success, measured not by how much one possessed but by the worth of one’s soul and its freedom and liberty. This is not beclouded by the fact that the piece of land that the church was allocated is the one located inside and within the “evil forest.” This demonstrates that the materialistic imprisonment under which the people of Umuofia suffered and labored was mainly emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

At Mbanta, as the mandatory period of Okonkwo’s stay in exile drew to a close, they were accosted with a more genial and more practical show of Okonkwo’s achievements, which in this case transcended materialistic achievement and wealth creation and utilization. He was said to have prospered in his motherland, so when the time for his stay in exile was abated, he decided to show his mother’s people appreciation. He began by sending some money to his friend Obierika to build two huts for him in his old compound where they would live. However, he reserved the building of his own “obi” and the walls of his compound for himself when he returned. He showed maturity when he resisted returning to Umuofia earlier than the exact seven years, because doing that “would have taken something from the full penalty of seven years” (Achebe 1984, p.115). And that could not be. The true test of his wealth came when he hosted the entire family. We are quickly reminded that “Okonkwo never did things by halves. When his wife, Ekwefi, protested that two goats were sufficient for the feast, he told her that it was not her affair. In Okonkwo’s words, “I am calling it a feast because I have the wherewithal.” I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. My mother’s people have been good to me, and I must show my gratitude” (Achebe, 1984, p. 117). This is Okonkwo’s good side; perhaps his exile has removed the savagery and ruthlessness from his life. He seemed to now know how to cater to the people, appreciate someone’s good will towards him, and have good community fellowship with his mother’s people.

In attestation to this change in Okonkwo, three goats and a good number of chickens were slaughtered, making it appear as if Okonkwo were celebrating a wedding feast. In addition, yam pottage, cassava foofoo, egusi, and bitter leaf soup were used to lavishly entertain the people, and also, “pots and pots of palm wine” were made available. “There was so much food and drink that many kinsmen whistled in surprise”



(Achebe, 1984, p. 117). The food was supplied in excess abundance so that not only did every member of the “*Umunna*” present at the feast get their portion in order of their years, but even “the few who had been unable to come had their shares taken out for them in due turn.” In one of the statements made by an elder in praise of Okonkwo’s magnanimity, one of the elders said,

If I say that we did not expect a big feast, I will be suggesting that we did not know how open-handed our son, Okonkwo, is. We all know him, and we expected a big feast. But it turned out to be even bigger than we expected. Thank you. May everything you take in come back to you tenfold. It is good in these days when the younger generation considers themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things in the grand old way (Achebe 1984, p. 118).

This last outing in Mbanta was a superlative demonstration of his appreciation for having been welcomed and given a place to settle in Mbanta and showed his concern for others. On the other hand, Okonkwo showed that he was nonetheless stuck to the Igbo cultural group’s traditional ways of doing things, which included having to flaunt his wealth and achievement. It is evident that in Mbanta, away from Umuofia, the level and extent of Okonkwo’s competitiveness, psychological pursuit of achievement, and material wealth, which brought him loneliness, social isolation from others, and attachment to his possessions, were reduced. This break in pathological attachment to wealth was what enabled him to foster wellbeing, good relationships, a sense of purpose, and a good sense of social responsibility. This is what caused him to be so good at being described as being “open-handed,” which he demonstrated towards the end of his stay in Mbanta.

Okonkwo eventually returned to his home, Umuofia, with high hopes that he would have to “return with a flourish and regain the seven wasted years,” regain his place among the nine (9) masked spirits that administered justice, lead his people against the new religion, and take the highest title in Umuofia. He was at least convinced that since some of the losses he suffered were largely reparable, he would have to hasten to cover up and redeem the lost time. This accounted for why he did not have a carefully laid out blue-print outlining how he intended to achieve these. This has a direct semblance to Chinua Achebe’s onslaught on Nigerians who he says only developed an aggressive millionaire and “self-centered pedestrianism,” but which was bereft and emptied of objectivity, intellectual rigour, and sound political thought (Ukwueze & Okey-Agbo 2020; Okolie, 2021). Okonkwo’s return ought to have been pursued cautiously and based on a carefully designed, sober and self-deprecating blueprint. This Okonkwo did not put in place, but like most Nigerian profligate and depraved politicians, he sought to rebuild his compound on a “more magnificent scale,” demonstrate his achievement and hard-earned wealth by initiating his two sons into the “Ozo” society, and take the highest title in Umuofia. He drew on the wrong inferences, one of which was that “his yams grew abundantly,” such that he thought that, “It seemed to him that his *chi* might now be making amends for the past disaster.” That this thought pattern was hugely flawed is discernible from the fact that even in exile, a more grievous family disaster took place when his first son, Nwoye, abandoned the gods of his fathers and turned to Christianity because it satisfied all of his heart’s yearnings.

Okonkwo’s first attractions were his two daughters, Ezinma and Obiageli, whom he put up as “prized bulls” that should announce his grand entry into Umuofia. He

thought that, with two beautiful grown-up daughters, his return to Umuofia would attract considerable attention and that his future sons-in-law would only be men of authority in the clan. “The poor and unknown would not dare to come forth” (Achebe, 1984, p. 122). At that time, Okonkwo did not alert his mind to the fact that, with the turn of events, his future son-in-law could be a Christian, someone who did not know or hear of Okonkwo’s fame. The facts deducible from the book was that “Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years that Okonkwo had been in exile.” Missionaries had come, and many hearts had been regenerated, not only the low-born and outcast, but also worthy men joined. It is also worthy of note to observe that in Umuofia, as had happened in Mbanta, there had arisen a new basis and understanding of what achievement and greatness stand for. “The new religion, government, and trading stores were very much in the people’s eyes and minds” (Achebe, 1984, p. 129).

The new order is centred on and revolves around the Christian faith, which faith has become a token of greatness and has been elevated above and above the traditional way of life of the people of Umuofia. This explains why Ogbuefi Ugonna, a highly placed man who had taken two titles, would cut off the titles from his anklet, cast them away, and now join the Christian faith. The Christian ideals being projected also uphold the performance of administrative duties in the church, trade, government, and administration. It is in that capacity that here we have the District Commissioner, court messengers, and interpreters, who were mostly “arrogant and high-handed.” Achebe (1984, p. 123). The craftiness of the blacks working for the British administration explains why Obierika said, “But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power?” Obierika also stated further that the white man “has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe, 1984, p.124). These were among the basic reasons why the “war-like” people of Umuofia could no longer talk as one, fight as one, or drive out the white man as one.

Mr. Brown (the first white Christian missionary in Umuofia) urged his members to exercise restraint, always harping on the fact that although “everything was possible, everything was not expedient” (Searle, 2007). He was honoured by the community and presented with a carved elephant’s tusk, a sign of dignity and rank; while Akunna, one of the clan’s leaders, gave out one of his sons to be taught the white man’s knowledge, the soon to be criteria of greatness. This was again re-asserted in the speech of Mr. Brown when he cautioned, “The leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write.” If Umuofia failed to send their children to the school, “strangers would come and rule them” (Achebe 1984, p. 128). The new breed of leaders included messengers, interpreters, court clerks, and teachers who were the products of the missionary churches and schools.

This change in the criteria of greatness and material possessions occasioned by the birth of the church was what seemed to make the values of the community take a back seat. The climax came during the annual ceremony in honour of the earth deity, which fell on a Sunday, the day the Christians attended church services, and this prevented the women of the church from returning back to their homes because the masked *Egwugwu* (*masquerade*) was on display in broad daylight. To show that the power equation has changed, when one of the *Egwugwu* flogged a church member for challenging them, instead of backing away, that *Egwugwu* was unmasked by Enoch, one of the overzealous Christians. Even if Enoch was coarse and scornful, why did the *Egwugwu* not abide by the requisite codes of practice? The ensuing fracas was caused by

the Egwugwu, but no one seems to care anymore because a higher offence has been deemed to have been committed. For the Church and Enoch in particular, it was a great achievement, unrivalled in the history of Umuofia. To unmask one of the *egwugwu* spirits deserved applause and sent a message to the non-Christians that the masquerades should not interfere in the church's business. Enoch was disappointed when the Church decided that he should hide in the parsonage instead of declaring a "holy war" (Achebe 1984, p. 132).

The full expression of a new order and a change in values followed the District Commissioner's sending for the chiefs of Umuofia. He disarmed and imprisoned them. The people of Umuofia were also asked to cough up the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand cobras as fines. Okonkwo was pissed off by the arrest of the elders of Umuofia, and his anger simply tripped over the edge. As the community meeting at the market square drew to a close, he remembered one of the clan's greatest, Okudo. Okudo was not a warrior, but Okonkwo knew him as one who "sang a war song in a way that no other man could." He wished that the crowd gathered at the market-place would elect to fight the white man. During a meeting, Okika said, "We must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil, we must root them out too. We must balance this water now that it is only ankle deep" (Achebe, 1984, pp. 143-144). This speech was enough to not only incite but also generate so much rage and hatred towards Okonkwo and all those who were enraged against the white man. It was into the midst of the burning inferno that the five messengers from the District Commissioner walked.

On page 144, the messengers merely reminded the people of the change in power, which was why the head messenger ordered, "the white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop" (Achebe 1984, p. 114). This made Okonkwo's anger overflow its bank because he could not bear taking orders from such a man of mean reputation, not even in the name of the District Commissioner. Okonkwo's reaction was swift and in his usual style, to correct what he saw to be an erroneous impression, he raised his machet and it descended twice, severing the head from the body of the Head Messenger. But indeed, it was Okonkwo that was wrong. He had again acted impulsively. He was an experienced warrior. From his view, he saw that his people had broken into a tumult instead of killing the other four messengers to ignite a full-scale war. Soon afterward, the reality dawned on him that the *status quo ante* had changed irreversibly, and that the white man had taken over the leadership, which is what he so madly wanted. There was no need to live any longer, because continuing to live meant being subjected to the whims and caprices of the white man. Okonkwo couldn't bear this because of his pride and self-importance.

The proof of who holds the mantle of power was publicly displayed in Chapter Twenty-Five, where the District Commissioner led an armed band of soldiers and court messengers to arrest Okonkwo, the murderer. To demonstrate his power, he asked, "Which of you is Okonkwo?" The way he was answered made him feel piqued, for "the commissioner became angry and red in the face." He warned the men that unless they produced Okonkwo forthwith, he would lock them up. To Umuofians, these are alien words, for a stranger to lock up the owners of the land. To Okonkwo's clansmen, this threat would not have produced Okonkwo if he was alive since he was an adult and could not be tied to any other person's apron strings. This is the sort of crude display of power that made Okonkwo choose to walk away from the scene playing out by taking his own life. Why can't the local people of Umuofia be put in charge of their own destiny?

Why would a person who does not understand the customs and practises of the people be the one to pronounce on which practises or ways of life are bad and objectionable? The only option thus open to Okonkwo, whose come-back determination was to uproot and chase the white man out of Umuofia, was to choose to die alone.

### **CULTURAL CRITICISM OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S EMPHASIS ON THE INORDINATE QUEST FOR MATERIALISM BY THE IGBO ETHNIC GROUP**

The opening statement in *Things Fall Apart* further opens to us the myriads of the author's intentions, which I tie "to the psychological difference between what remains unconscious in the author and what interpretation of his text makes explicit" (Halliwell, 2015, p. 4). My examination of the psychology and personality of Okonkwo led me to a bizarre find: that the author's creation was a psychopath, an eccentric, and a maverick, whose deviant attitude was guided by the image of perfection rather than by the realities of the world, and which was evident in his lack of remorsefulness, empathy, and tendencies that hang on the fringes of criminality.

The acknowledgement of achievement as the principal value continues as I observe a continuous flow of outpouring of emotions on and adulation of Okonkwo, as when it is added that it "was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time, Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (Achebe 1984, p. 3). The writer doesn't want the reader to forget how important it is to achieve, so Okonkwo is built as a gateway into Igbo culture and traditional society. *Things Fall Apart* was used to dress the work in such a pristine, tantalizing, and prominently effusive thought pattern, and this is what makes it stand out and which decorates and adorns the culture of *Things Fall Apart's Umuofia* and, perhaps, Africans at large. This is also an indication of how Africans admire masculinity and manhood. For these Africans, success has become the most important thing in their lives, which means that it can't be changed or changed. This contrasts with how quickly a hermit crab trades one shell for another on the beach.

This seems to be taking the notion of greatness too far. Does this not explain why Nigeria and the states on the African continent remain steeped in the rat race mentality and corruption? Why does everyone clamour to get to the top and then heave a sigh of relief having arrived? What does it take to get to the top, having mixed one's labour with the gifts of nature? What if, peradventure, our highly prized achievement goes wild, gathering with it other repugnant worldly vices, deprecated methods, notions, and corruption of values quite alien from those which ought to be rightly applauded or appraised? In the words of Robert Chodat (2016), "What the sentence expresses, that is, is not simply the mind of a particular character or author," but styles of thought pervading an entire culture.

The author's style draws on the use of similes, as in "Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan," bringing life and determination to the fore, since through the instrumentality of "achievement," it was easier to appreciate the intensity of bush fires in the harmattan razing down and meandering through African forest vegetation, quite reckless and unstoppable and obviously dangerous. This gives impetus to our interpretation of him and gives us an inroad into the psychology and personality of the man, Okonkwo. Maybe his achievement would enter his head and consume him and those who came into contact with him like bush fires in the harmattan, which is exactly what happened. Achebe is undoubtedly an expert at "capturing timelessly and

memorably emotions that could be expressed in no other way, but these acts are not independent of attitudes and even feelings in the writer” (Lamarche, 2010, p. 194). To make a quick reference to this side of Okonkwo, he was pictured with the following words: “He had no patience with unsuccessful men.” He had no patience with his father. This is the kernel of the entire discourse, for by this explanation and consistently dwelling on Okonkwo, new facts emerge that show that there with Okonkwo, there was something greater than achievement and masculinity. He was under the spell of the fear of being thought weak, and not even that he was indeed proven to be weak, coupled with the morbid fear of failure.

Ordinarily, Okonkwo cannot be seen in any way to have failed, so what is this insipid feeling eating him slowly and steadily? Okonkwo was conscious of why and what made his father fail in life as a father, farmer, warrior and in his duties to his family and the clan. But notwithstanding, Unoka was a brilliant musician and did definitely express the Socratic epistolary of self-examination and self-transformation through “mindfully focused and stylistically attractive communication” of music directed at how to “deepen the bonds of friendly affection and mutual appreciation.” He was thus a success by our standards today, except that his earnings from music were used by him for revelry and alcoholism. That Okonkwo allows himself to be unnecessarily held down by the nuances of his days of lack, starvation, and having to work early to fend for himself and his father, mother, and other siblings conveys a psychological tinge to aspects of his remembering, responding, and fantasising about the future, maybe by how he dreamt and hallucinated. This explains why Okonkwo failed to understand that his father, Unoka, in doing what he did as best as he could, was “as honest, clear, insightful, and articulate as possible in expressing himself” (Shusterman, 2010, p. 13). This brings us to the reiterations of Sigmund Freud, that human cognition asserts much of what we apparently forget but which is “stored deep in the subconscious mind, including painful traumatic memories from childhood that have been repressed” (Bent, et al., 2020, p. 197). Okonkwo is proven to be a psychopath, ready to explode, especially with the voice roaring deep within him, urging him to be “ready to recognise the compelling force of destiny.”

It is my view that *Things Fall Apart* created and confirmed Okonkwo to being a psychopath, deranged and frenzied by the fear of being thought weak. There is concordance with Martha Nussbaum, who settles it in our favour that:

there is a complicity between the consciousness of the reader (and the writer) of stories and the consciousness, the morality, of perception. For stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are: to respond vigorously with senses and emotions before the new; to care deeply about chance happenings in the world, rather than to fortify ourselves against them; to wait for the outcome, and to be bewildered – to wait and float and be actively passive” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 255).

A brief examination of the mood swings, mental behaviour, and mind set of Okonkwo reveals an in-depth complicity between his consciousness and the people’s perception of morality. This is the only viable explanation for Okonkwo’s participation in the murder of his son, Ikemefuna, because he doesn’t want to appear weak in front of his fellow clansmen. And since it came on the heels of several warnings, we are bound to ask, what was wrong with his sense of morality? What could have informed his decision to play a

prominent role in killing a child who calls him “Father?” And, how come Okonkwo did not know that this would translate into a grievous mistake that would trail him to his grave?

Okonkwo, it must be stated, had a lot of options. He was free to do as he chose, and his actions were not deterministic. In the case of the killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo would have decided to remain at home, gone to see his friend Obierika, and if he was minded to accompany the elders of the clan who had gone to kill Ikemefuna in obedience to the commands of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, he ought not to have joined them to engage in the killing. In a traditional African society, if a man who is being chased runs into your house as a means of trying to hide from killers or assailants, it is culturally behoved for that person to protect and safeguard him/her, as his/her guest for that time. It is not customary to release the person to the assailant so that he/she can take him/her and kill him/her, even if the assailant is an old enemy of the person. This is the atmosphere conveyed to me when the narrative tells us that “although (Ikemefuna) had felt uneasy at first, he was not afraid now.” Okonkwo walked behind him. He could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father. It is therefore quite established in the narrative that Okonkwo actually committed his first murder on the day he killed Ikemefuna. The fact that he tried to kill a boy who lived under his roof and called him “father” for more than three years, even though he had been told not to do that, makes him a scapegoat.

The meaning that can be drawn from the display of wealth and affluence at a wedding ceremony is that since achievement takes precedence over all other values in Igbo society, which is replicated in all other cultures of African extraction, a man will go to any length to become an achiever. This will definitely trigger unconventional behaviour patterns, including resorting to criminality and short-cuts. This has its own negative effects on not only the health of the people, but on society’s values as well. In the words of Dittmar, Long, and Bond (2007), the sort of developmental pattern and negative self-appraisal that were prevalent in Umuofia, which they cautioned, could be “linked to a materialistic value orientation as a form of psychological imprisonment, a “cage within” where individuals attempt to construct an identity through material goods that ends up as a psychological state where the self is non-authentic: The impact of the material “Good Life” and “Body Perfect” ideals on individuals’ identity and well-being is often negative. “The pursuit of these ideals often means damage to their psychological, and even physical, health” (Dittmar et al., p. 23).

The social life and existence in *Things Fall Apart* is distinctly submerged in a continuous struggle for wealth and the acquisition of materialism, which Tim Kasser (2018) says is responsible for treating others in a more competitive, manipulative, less empathetic, and selfish way of life, which is socially destructive and socially self-destructive. Studies have shown that materialism “eats us from the inside out” because it does not provide contentment, which is why owning more wealth is associated with depression, anxiety, broken relationships, and the collapse of community and civic life. The emphasis on wealth and achievement by Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* therefore prompts not only the above description of the life of Umuofia, but material aspiration. He became a beast without a heart or feelings because of this desire to keep growing and to be rich.

My position remains that, from the interplay of the factors espoused by Ogbuefi Ezeudo’s burial announcement and burial rites, Umuofia society primarily revolves

around the ideologies that encourage individuals to amass wealth and strive to achieve greatness and in which these values determine the worth of its members. This being the case, nothing would deter individuals from engaging in culturally sanctioned pursuits of amassing wealth, possessions, and fame as a way of overcoming insecurity and poverty; the only thing that would make them feel good about themselves is (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). This fully demonstrates that people's tendencies towards materialism and consumption stem from the fear of death (Sheldon & Kasser, 2008). Who would not like to be celebrated in death? Who would not like to be buried with so much fanfare and pomp? This is why we are averse to the publicity and celebrations that greeted the exit of all such men like Ogbuefi Ezeudo, just as it was stated to lead the dead to transcend the land of the living and pass into the land of the dead, the "domain of the ancestors" (Achebe 1984: 85). Unfortunately, it was at this burial that the fate that befell Okonkwo happened to him when his gun exploded and a "piece of iron pierced the boy's heart" (Achebe 1984: 86).

This calls attention to the fact that it was and is wrong to worship material things, as was done in *Things Fall Apart*, and that the entire scenario calls into question the emphasis placed on wealth acquisition. If the dead were a pauper, an untitled man, or a palm wine tapper, is it certain that the celebration would have been a wild burial celebration? Would such low-keyed burial rites have led to the death of the young boy? This again proves that the prominent place given to wealth and hard-earned achievement is a fundamental error. The paradox that lurks beneath the burial ceremony of Ogbuefi Ezeudu is the dramatic irony that fate has kept in store for Okonkwo. One that stands in stark contrast to how Okonkwo, one of Umuofia's greatest wrestlers, lords, and unrivalled achievers, will be buried when he dies. This sad note of a twist in Okonkwo's fate was hinted to us through the flashback conveyed by the declaration, "His life had been ruled by a great passion—to become one of the lords of his clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything was broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly, his personal chi was not made for great things" (Achebe 1984, p. 92). Okonkwo was described as one who loudly proclaimed "yes," but whose "chi" was said to have cried "nay." This helps to paint a picture of Okonkwo as a once-great warrior and achiever who has now given in to despair and is very unhappy about having to leave his home and move to Mbanta because of an accident.

Unfortunately, because Okonkwo's ego was cast in stone and emblazoned with the materialistic values of the Igbo ethnic nationality that Okonkwo represented, he never adverted to nor gave any thought to that aspect of his life that was enthusiastic about community life and the general good of the community. He was too preoccupied with how to succeed, how to be the highest personality and the overlord of Umuofia, which is akin to how our politicians in Nigeria begin their chase for a higher political fortune as soon as they are declared winners in an election. This has been responsible for most Nigerian politicians successively failing to give attention to fulfilling their party manifestos since it is seen as diversionary in their bid to accumulate and embezzle public funds needed to bankroll the next election. In the same way, this work shows that Okonkwo was more concerned with how to return to the community after the seven years of exile had elapsed and continued his inordinate acquisition of more and more titles. Like one whose soul has been sold to materialism, this is at the basis of Okonkwo's

insanity. This is why he became psychopathic, one for whom nothing else mattered except materialism and achievement.

His nonchalance, lethargy, and apathy toward life; how to make good use of his life and his expanse of wealth; and how to contribute meaningfully to and become beneficial to his community were what his “tall” ego failed to bring to his notice. His beclouded sense of reasoning left him trudging in the drudgery that his masculinity had left him. What makes Okonkwo’s actions moral or immoral in this case has everything to do with “the modelling of one’s relation to one’s own actions and character in terms of a kind of moral courtroom” which Immanuel Kant left to God and the State to sanction. Okonkwo’s values condemned anything related to gentleness, humanity, beneficence, affability, nay, even, at proper intervals, play, frolic, and gaiety (Foley, 2001). Okonkwo was mentally overwhelmed by the material pursuit for which he had sold his soul, and he gave no fruitful thought to his new fate on how he would have to work out how he was to manage it, and because he obviated from it the principle of good will, it not only overwhelmed him, but destroyed him.

This materialistic tendency, which shows up in all that is done in *Things Fall Apart*, we contend, reignites and emphasises the inordinate quest for materialism by the Igbo ethnic nationality. Achebe did not feign that what he wrote in *Things Fall Apart* was a true reflection of Igbo cultural values because he boldly asserted elsewhere that:

My own assessment is that the role of the writer is not a rigid position and depends to some extent on the state of health of his or her society. In other words, if society is ill, the writer has the responsibility to point it out. If society is healthier, the writer’s job is different (Achebe 2012, p. 57).

This is the ultimate drive of Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, to point out the ills of Igbo society, and to this he adds, “among my own Igbo people, that art must never be allowed to escape into the rarefied atmosphere but must remain active in the lives of members of the society” (Achebe, 2012, p. 56). Added to this, Achebe says, “When I wrote *Things Fall Apart*, I began to understand and value my traditional Igbo history even more. I am not suggesting that I was an expert in the history of the world” (Achebe, 2012, p. 39). This nails it.

## CONCLUSION

I have critically examined Okonkwo’s psychopathic preoccupation with possessions, power, wealth, and achievement and have come to the place where we agree with psychologists that materialists are unhappy, depressed, and have broken relationships because they treat others in largely competitive, possessive, manipulative, and selfish ways. Quite like what happens in the larger society, the big and mighty “tend to substitute the values and goals of the larger society with their personal values and objectives, thereby pursuing pecuniary interests at the expense of popular will” (Asaju, Arome *et al.*, 2014, p. 123). Achievement has therefore been shown to be the paradox which Chinua Achebe uses to draw attention to the inordinate quest for materialism, wealth, and achievement by the Igbo ethnic group, east of Nigeria. This trait, for now, is not restricted to the Igbo, but it has become the label of Nigerians generally today, and it surely gives cause for concern.

The said individual and personal life of Okonkwo grew and expanded to cover his ills from the Igbo culture, which ultimately extended to all of Nigeria today. The Otokoto



saga, exposed in Owerri in 1996, now has its contemporaries in blood money, kidnapping, ritual killing, Yahoo-Yahoo, Ritual Money, Okija/Ogwugwu Shrine horror saga, and Soka Forest Horror of Oyo State as short-cuts to wealth. The old order has to change, the emphasis has to be modified, and the spread has to be contained and extinguished now. The political class has continued to show varying types of political intents, so that while some, like Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, are ready to work to make Nigeria a better place, even using their hard-earned resources, others, like Chief Obafemi Awolowo, have it scripted in his memoirs that he wants to acquire all the money and power he can with his brains and brawn.

Political correctness should be tailored to respond to the new order of values based on certain extrinsic standards, not made to conform to such things as the materialist psychosomatic impulses that moved Okonkwo. The tendency to get rich quick breeds a lot of criminality, and this brings to mind the evil of ritual killing and rascality in politics that a wealth-prone politics has caused Nigeria.

In Achebe own words, he concludes this work with an objectively moral admonition. He cautions:

The reality of today, different as it is from the reality of my society one hundred years ago, is and can be important if we have the energy and the inclination to challenge it, to go out and engage with its peculiarities, with the things that we do not understand. The real danger is the tendency to retreat into the obvious, the tendency to be frightened by the richness of the world and to clutch what we always have understood . . . There is no undue respect for what the last generation did, because if you do that too much, it means that there is no need for me to do anything, because it is already done” (Achebe 2012, p. 59).

It is recommended that all of us as Nigerians have to launch out, make amendments to what traits have the potential to destroy the very fabric of our society and adopt moral codes that will improve the general wellbeing of the people and improve the lot of the common man.

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