

Things fall apart

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* can be perceived as one that highlights the idea of an Igbo epic hero. The text is an analysis of the protagonist Okwonko, as representative of an Igbo epic hero. The term epic hero often describes a character as being larger than life and who expresses extraordinary traits. When considering Greek mythology the greatest epic heroes are Odysseus who is worshiped for his virtuousness amongst other traits, as well as Achilles for his valor. In Igbo mythology an example of the ultimate epic hero is Beowulf of the Anglo- Saxon times, in which he portrays honorable characteristics (Nnolim, 1992). By considering Achebe's Okwonko it is found that he does not possess the character traits of an ' epic' hero. Indeed the Igbo culture does not acknowledge the idea of an epic hero, but rather focus on the concept of heroism. The latter suggest that Okonkwo can be perceived as an epic hero within the Igbo culture. Justifiably so, considering that Okonkwo does not fit the conception of being an ideal epic hero but rather correspond to what is considered Igbo epic heroism. According to Azuonye Igbo epic, refers to real men that acquired heroism in pursuing a life protecting others in risking their own (Azuonye, 1984). However Okonkwo while being classified as an Igbo epic hero did not appreciate the idea of having a heroic obligation to society (Lindfors 1991, 17). Indeed the latter apply to the notion that Okonkwo classify affection with weakness- which is not an ideal of an Igbo epic hero. Furthermore, this concept of being afraid to show weakness through affection can be marked as the reason for his apprehension toward his responsibilities to others. Hence Okonkwo's perception of the Igbo epic hero was that the hero must not reveal kindness, let alone feel feelings of emotion lest it be anger (Achebe, 2001). However,

in the end Okonkwo's erroneous belief of what describes the ultimate epic hero in Igbo culture will ironically lead to his down fall. The epic hero is defined as a great warrior; a role model; a man of intelligence; as self-restraint; a legendary figure and someone who is able to cross boundaries. However the heroes of Igbo society are handpicked individuals that must attain wealth through their own hard work due to their lack of hereditary kingship. Furthermore the epic hero's loyalty is not merely to himself but he is also duty-bound to the existence of his society (Nnolim, 1992). There are many ironies with regards to Okonkwo's character and the hero qualities he represents. The epic hero is normally born into royalty and wealth, just like Homer's Odysseus. However in Igbo society, class systems or connections with powerful figures does not deem the worth of an individual. What is of great significance in Igbo culture is hard work and personal accomplishment, which is how Okonkwo achieved his powerful status in Umuofia (Nnolim, 1992). For the reason that he is a self-made hero, possessed remarkable strength and courage and is widely respected by many he fits the category of an Igbo epic hero. It is also for this reasons that Okonkwo enjoyed great recognition not only amongst his clan, but in neighboring villages as well. He therefore "[c]learly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders" (Achebe, 2001). The latter is in reference to the notion that Okonkwo achieved great things through hard work, despite his lack of affluence. Ironically Okonkwo fell apart because he deemed attainment as the essence for being an Igbo epic hero. Thus he assumed that for the reason that he asserted dominance and authority within his clan he did not amount to principles. Yet in the end it was it was this flaw that ultimately led to his end.

The role of the Igbo epic hero also entails the ability to balance their emotions which contributes to their quality of self-restraint. Generally this idea of showing emotion is often perceived as a feminine quality. However in Homer's *The Odyssey* there are a few occasions where Odysseus reveals his emotional side. The latter is illustrated in books 5 where Odysseus cried when he thought he would never return to his wife and son, similarly in book 16 when he sees his son Telemachus after twenty years (Homer,).

Conversely what made Okonkwo a true Igbo epic hero was the ability not to show affection (Nnolim, 1992). Therefore he refused to express any emotion except for anger, to his wives, children as well as Ikemefuna. As a fifteen-year old boy Ikemefuna were to live with Onkonkwo and his family for three years. During the three years there developed an intimate relationship between Okonkwo and Ikemefuna. Onkonkwo was not only a guardian to Ikemefuna, but he also saw in him the ideal son. The fore mentioned was for the reason that Ikemefuna showed great promise of being a strong and courageous man like Okonkwo. Furthermore Okonkwo despises his own son Nwoye for showing weakness through his affectionate deeds. An example of the fore mentioned is his crying for Ikemefuna on the day he was killed. He wants Nwoye to have the same drive that he had when he was that age (Achebe, 2001). However Okonkwo is not an inspiration to Nwoye which is why he does not conform to what his father deems important such as his hatred for affection. It can be said that he (Okonkwo) has an obsession with manliness and what it entails. He allows his anger to compell him into becoming a ruthless almost inhumane creature which ultimately causes him to go from a heroic figure to a tragic hero. Okonkwo's anger therefore

consumes him which causes him to fall apart (Nnolim, 1992). Nonetheless Okonkwo's strong and authoritative demeanor is more often than not the result of his fear for showing emotion. Furthermore, his fear of being considered a weak-link like his father causes him to engage in irrational acts of violence (Lindfors, 1991). Hence, his hatred of showing emotion is another misinterpretation of what illustrates an Igbo epic hero, and it was this lack of affection that was the result of his demise. When the epic hero honors his gods or in Igbo culture, Chukwu, he not only act as role model to his society but at the same time he is shaping his destiny. Igbo men believed in the idea of ' chi' which describe their personal spirit. They have a belief that when a man says yes, his chi says yes (Achebe, 2001). However after the death of Ikemufuna, Okonkwo's chi was not in agreement with his destiny. A great example of an epic hero as role model is Odysseus. In Greek Mythology Homer's *The Odyssey* (Odysseus' ideologies) were used as a learning tool to teach young men the code of conduct. In considering the protagonist Okonkwo, it is clear that his brutality and ruthlessness overshadows his nobleness (Lindfors 1991). The latter can be seen in how Okonkwo disrupts the weak of peace; which makes Obirieka declare that "[O] konkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (Achebe, 2001, 30). In addition Okonkwo's efforts in seeking preference or power in his clan are hampered due to his lack of sentiment. Okonkwo can therefore not be seen as someone who is an inspiration to others. In his novel, *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe asserts that " a man does not challenge his chi to a wrestling match" (Achebe, 1960). The last mentioned suggest that one does not go against the wishes of his Chukwu or his god,

yet Okonkwo disrespected Chukwu on numerous occasions (Achebe, 2001). It can be said that Okwonko exhibits the same demeanors as the Greek epic hero Achillies. Just as Achillies defied his god Zeus, Okwonko disobeyed his. However dishonor to a god have detrimental effects on your life. In considering Okonkwo's inappropriate behavior towards the gods, it is clear that he misinterpreted his responsibility of being an Igbo epic hero. Therefore his ignorance cost him the favor from the gods and in the end it cost him his life (Achebe, 2001). Thus, if one refuses to comply with the rules of the gods it will be fatal to his fate. Hence the idea of disregarding ones higher spirit is a revulsion which can have catastrophic effects on the life of the epic hero, but it will also influence his clan. The last mentioned is in reference to what an elder said " if one finger brought oil it soiled the others" (Achebe 1996, 88). As an Igbo epic hero Okonko's behavior, therefore determined not only his fate, but that of his family and wider society. Nevertheless, Okonkwo lacked sentiment and for that reason he did not care about others' misfortunes. The only thing that he cared for was his accomplishment and the idea of proving his manly worth in order to become one of the lords in his clan (Achebe, 2001). In addition just like the protagonist Beowulf, Okonkwo ended up a tragic hero (Lindfors, 1991). After Ikemufuna's death Okonkwo's prosperous life began to fall apart after he contradicted the god's demands of not being part of the killing of Ikemufuna. Yet Okonkwo's fear of appearing weak and his desire to prove his manhood as Igbo epic hero, resulted in him taking Ikemufina's life. The latter was particularly devastating because Ikemufuna looked to Okonkwo as a father figure. Nonetheless this same fear would later lead Okonwko in to taking his

own life, which is an abomination to his clan (Achebe, 2001). In this case, Okonkwo's suicide can be perceived as a distinguishing trait of Igbo culture (Nnolim, 1992). Nonetheless, Igbos' complex concept of a hero is also contradictory to the god's wishes, as committing suicide is perceived as the highest crime against the gods. Thus a hero can only be a hero in the context and to the extent that his society allows him (Achebe, 2001). Accordingly even as epic hero Okonkwo's actions could not be justified. Nevertheless, Okonkwo can in some respects be perceived as a true Igbo epic hero. At his death, Obierika calls Okonkwo "[o]ne of the greatest men in Umuofia" (Achebe, 2001, 208). While he had nothing but determination on his side, he could still achieve success. His hard work and dedication allowed him to gain the type of authority that was equal to the elders of the clan. Okonkwo was also a great warrior who could defend and protect his society. However even though he had great strength and power, Okonkwo also had the fear of being thought weak (Achebe, 2001). The latter contributed to his misunderstanding of what characterized an Igbo epic hero. Okonkwo had the impression that to show your courage one must be brutal and to show strength meant not having remorse, irrespective of what the consequences might be. Nevertheless, it was this misconception of and his desire to show his worth as a man that leads to his death. What is ironic in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the idea of Okonkwo who falls into depression as a result of his guilty conscious for killing Ikemefuna. The fore mentioned is contradicting to Okonkwo's adamancy toward feeling any emotion except for fear, since his depression after Okonkwo's death was as a result of of guilt (Nnolim, 1992). What can also be compared is the notion that the title of the novel links with

the protagonist's personality. In the end Okonkwo literary 'falls apart'. Thus the character symbolizes its title. However Okonkwo's downfall is not necessarily due to his flaws but rather relates to the role of heroism in the cultural belief systems of the Igbo (Okhamafe, 1995). The latter suggest that Okonkwo's beliefs of what an Igbo epic hero is were misinterpreted by what it actually meant. The idea of being a great warrior is therefore not the only phenomenon that defines an epic hero. Furthermore the hero must also execute his heroic duties to himself as well as his society. Hence for the reason that the hero, Okonkwo had such a strong sense of appreciation for heroism, his desires overshadowed his judgments (Lindfors, 1991). As a result he failed to comply with the rules of Chukwu because he did not want to appear vulnerable. Yet at the end of the day it was this fear of weakness that ultimately led to his death.