

Purple hibiscus and things fall apart: comparing father son relationship themes

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



Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* both emphasize the complexities of father-son relationships. The major theme of parental conflict is developed throughout the course of both texts and serves to illustrate the impact of Western imperialism on Igbo culture. While Adichie openly acknowledges that she was inspired by Achebe, a closer look at the nuanced differences between the two novels illuminates Adichie's own voice. Okonkwo, the misogynistic character with a masculinity complex, is a man still scarred by his father's pathetic reputation in *Things Fall Apart*. His father's ill repute and lack of titles spur Okonkwo to pursue a better life in an attempt to dissociate himself from his father. On the other hand, Eugene, the antagonist and father figure in *Purple Hibiscus*, ostracizes his father on the basis of religious disagreement. Adichie uses the differences between Eugene's and Okonkwo's paternal conflicts to comment on the changes that Western colonialism has brought about in Nigeria.

Even though Achebe's and Adichie's works of realistic fiction share many similarities, the reasons for and methods by which Eugene and Okonkwo respond to paternal conflict differ, thus allowing Adichie to portray the transition from Igbo to European-influenced Nigerian culture. The enmity between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka, is founded on the unadulterated standards of Igbo culture. More specifically, the instability is the result of Unoka's lack of determination and wealth : " When Unoka died he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?" (pg. 8). Unoka's failure in becoming a notable member within Umuofia is what gives Okonkwo the drive to strive for greatness. The standards present in Umuofia have not yet been impacted by

European colonialism, and, as such, give insight to the “ original” values of Igbo tradition. As a result, Adichie is able to use these standards as a foundation to create her own father-son dynamic by representing the relationship between Eugene and Papa Nnukwu through a different lens. While Okonkwo’s society in Umuofia underscores the importance of titles and status, Eugene’s more contemporary society in Enugu prioritizes Catholic principles, those which were derived from colonialism. The discord between Eugene and Papa Nnukwu is due to a fundamental difference in religious ideology. Eugene, who is Catholic, instills in his children the notion that taking part in or even observing any Igbo tradition is a sin. This belief makes a stable relationship with his father impossible, and leads to the estrangement of Papa Nnukwu in Eugene’s life. Eugene credits his prosperous life not to the guidance of his father but to the missionary school he attended as a child: “ I didn’t have a father who sent me to the best schools. My father spent his time worshipping gods of wood and stone. I would be nothing today but for the priests and sisters at the mission” (p. 47). He believes that Papa Nnukwu, who practices Igbo traditions, is a heathen and goes as far as to severely limit Jaja’s and Kambili’s interactions with him. Papa Nnukwu never wronged Eugene; in fact, it was Papa Nnukwu’s decision to send Eugene to the missionary school. However, after being indoctrinated into a set of stringent beliefs prohibiting him from coming in contact with a non-believer, Eugene distances himself and his family from his father. Papa Nnukwu falls short of Eugene’s standards and is consequently shunned. The transition of Nigerian society is evident not only in Eugene’s preference for the white pastor, Father Benedict, over the Nigerian pastor, Father Amadi,

but also in Eugene's fabricated British accent when speaking to Father Benedict.

The ways in which each character responds to parental conflict are also dissimilar. Okonkwo espouses a set of ideals that are entirely opposite to those of Unoka in an attempt to differentiate himself from his father's undesirable legacy. Umuofia does not judge an individual on his or her ancestors; rather, judgment is predicated on the actions of the individual. Umuofia's leniency allows Okonkwo to pursue a better life, and he ultimately accomplishes his goal: "Although 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 said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands so he ate with kings and elders" (pg. 8). Through perseverance and determination, Okonkwo is able to establish himself as one of the "greatest men of his time." His character differs completely from that of Unoka; Unoka was cowardly, lazy and of slight build. In contrast, Okonkwo was the greatest wrestler in all nine villages, steadfast in his work ethic, and respected throughout the community. Okonkwo is said to have "washed his hands" suggestive of the fact that he has dissociated himself from the bad name of his father and has become a revered member of Umuofia. The struggle that Okonkwo faces can be categorized as an external one, in that it is largely societal pressure which motivates Okonkwo.

Adichie alters the underlying reasons for conflict seen in *Things Fall Apart* in her depiction of Eugene and Papa Nnukwu to demonstrate the loss of cultural

identity as a result of imperialism. The dissension between Eugene and Papa Nnukwu is a paradigm for the cultural clash occurring on a larger scale within Nigeria. While Eugene practices Catholicism, a product of Christian expansionism in Africa, Papa Nnukwu practices the age-old Igbo tradition. Adichie contrasts Igbo tradition with European tradition throughout the text to symbolize the transformation of postcolonial Nigerian society. Eugene's forthright disapproval of Igbo tradition is ubiquitous throughout the text, to the extent that he urges his family to refrain from speaking in Igbo: " He [Eugene] hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English" (pg. 16). Eugene's attempt to inculcate in his children the notion that English is the " civilized" language is indicative of the deep-seated imperialist influence in Nigeria and the degree to which Eugene has internalized it. Adichie uses Eugene's relationship with his father as a means to further develop the notion of an ideological conflict between generations as a result of colonialist influence.

The differences in Adichie's and Achebe's portrayals of father-son conflict exemplify Adichie's own expression of the effects of European influence on Nigerian society. While both Eugene and Okonkwo have unstable bonds with their fathers, the core of each feud varies. While Okonkwo's relationship is affected by the standards of untouched Igbo tradition, Eugene's relationship with his father is affected by the standards of postcolonial Nigerian society. By shifting the context and nature of Eugene and Papa Nnukwu's relationship, Adichie essentially resumes the novel where Achebe had

stopped. Given that Purple Hibiscus takes place after Things Fall Apart, Adichie uses the time gap to convey the cultural change. The heightened importance of Catholicism that Adichie depicts symbolizes the impact of colonialism on Nigerian and furthermore Igbo culture, the contention between “white man’s” and “black man’s” ideology. On a larger scale, Adichie subtly illustrates the convergence of indigenous Nigerian culture and imperialistic European culture and shows the shift in religious ideology as a result, doing so through the microcosm of father-son relationships.