

The story of okonkwo: a fine balance of hope and tragedy

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



The South African Igbo tribe of Umuofia, as depicted in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," (1958) encompasses layer upon complex layer of social order. From birth to death, every aspect of Umuofian culture is defined by an intricate balance of ritual, which is transmitted through oral tradition.

Protagonist Okonkwo, appears to uphold the ways of his ancestors, and to represent the elite of his culture. It would seem as though the invasion of the colonialist empire is responsible for the disfigurement of Okonkwo's life.

Upon closer consideration, however, one finds that it is Okonkwo's polarized concepts of masculinity and femininity that are disfigured, and that he has never represented the balanced wisdom of his ancestors at all. Thus, as Achebe's juxtaposition of Okonkwo's rigid perspective and Umuofia's adaptive reality expands, the reader follows Okonkwo and his falsely gendered world's descent into chaos. "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (2860). The first sentence of the novel brings Okonkwo's narration directly into an insider perspective. This helps to establish a fair and extensively emic view of Umuofian culture. In this way readers can not only observe an inclusive outline of music and dance, law and justice, and religious ritual, but also understand the practicality behind values such as tribal unity, brotherly hospitality, and ancestor veneration.

Each of these values represents an aspect of Igbo culture integral to preserving the order of their world. Without any one of them, the Igbo people would become prone to collapse into 'mere anarchy'. One significant emic account in Chapter One depicts the highly developed and elevated art of oration as only an insider can: through proverb. "Among the Igbo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with

which words are eaten” (2862). Throughout the novel, ancestral wisdom is shown to be passed on in proverbs, fables and stories. To the Igbo oral tradition, the power of the story becomes the very medium through which culture is transmitted- just as palm oil is needed for the sustenance of an Igbo person. Thus it can be stated that in the story of “ Things Fall Apart”, stories not only represent order, but are necessary to maintain it. What is the wisdom which moves his ‘ Chi’ to do as he does? One should not mistake Okonkwo’s gruff exterior for his true feelings. On the contrary, the reader’s privileged vantage position reveals many paradoxical inward emotions. Achebe repeatedly frames Okonkwo’s thoughts with the condition, ‘ inwardly’. His ‘ slight stammer’ reveals much more of his Chi than his father’s skillful oration ever would. All of this contradiction drives the reader to investigate the truth of Okonkwo. To understand a man’s Chi, one must understand where his story begins. Just as Okonkwo’s fall is framed within the context of Umuofia, so is the story of his father, Unoka, framed within Okonkwo’s chronicle. The reader first objectively learns that Okonkwo’s father was a creative and loving man, with a great potential for happiness. In the context of the Igbo culture, however, he floundered; he was considered a failure. And so Unoka retained his passion for beauty and joy, but became familiar with sadness and pain. Through it all, the man never let the scorn of others control his behaviour: Unoka literally takes his flute to his ignominious grave. Okonkwo’s pride makes him vulnerable where his father was not. He vividly remembers a playmate call his father a name, bringing shame upon Okonkwo. This passage hints at not only the psychological origin, but the cultural relevance behind Okonkwo’s Chi. Okonkwo’s pride makes him

susceptible to succumb to his great consuming fear of rejection and contempt. And so, turns his fear into a motivation: to become all that his father is not, and reject his father's most treasured values. There is another story, however, which is spectacularly ignored by Okonkwo, and often overlooked by the reader as well. Only once, in the ninth chapter, is his mother elevated from the background of the story. Some nights after the abominable killing of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is swatting mosquitoes by his ear as he tries to sleep, and he remembers a fable his mother used to tell. "Mosquito, she had said, had asked Ear to marry him, whereupon she fell to the floor in uncontrollable laughter. 'How much longer do you think you will live?' She asked. 'You are already a skeleton.' Mosquito went away humiliated, and anytime he passed her way he told Ear that he was still alive" (2892). Okonkwo's repression of his mother's story does not diminish its significance or meaning. The ear, a symbol of creative power, femininity and of listening, causes shame in Mosquito with her rejection. By pointing out his mortality, Ear pierces to the very heart of Mosquito's fear. Ear will always live and be included as long as there are stories to tell and to hear. The story blends listening and life-force into a female representation while impressing on the reader Mosquito's solitude and mortality. Although the mosquito lives on, he buzzes away in shame, all too aware of his fragility and loneliness. Okonkwo believes his own escape from the fate of Mosquito can be navigated in the forceful manipulation of the Igbo relationship between achievement, age, and respect. "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" (2863). Okonkwo's need to wash his hands of

shame for his father is tremendous. In his desperateness Okonkwo sees past the storytelling power and wisdom of the elders. He assumes real authority to rest in those with achievement: kings. So while proverb stands true on its own, Okonkwo takes it a step further in internalizing it with the notion that “among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father” (2863). The outsider’s scope of this phrase objectifies the truth of its content, but also does not reflect the wisdom of Igbo elders. Clearly, to be included in the Igbo life, one must be familiar with the customs, traditions, and culture, all passed down in the oral tradition of storytelling. Despite the overwhelming significance of this fact to Okonkwo, he is already driven by fear of the story of his father, and so he rejects his mother’s lore. “But it was as silly as all women’s stories,” (2863) he thinks. The dramatic irony is painful. Even his son, Nwoye, recognizes the value of storytelling. Okonkwo moves away from his own mother, and continuously shows the world his virility with all of his achievements. Still, “He felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito” (2887). On he buzzes, reminding the ear that he is still alive. Umuofian culture uses several measurements for the worth of a man: wrestling, farming, and battle. Each task is integral to the community in its own way. Farming provides security in sustenance for family units. Wrestling brings the community together in competitive entertainment. Battle protects that which matters most: the community’s wombs. In each area, men are provided equal opportunity to improve the community, and to be rewarded with wealth and honor. Both ability and will play central roles in all three tasks. A man’s worth, therefore, rests on his physical prowess, predilection to violence, hard

work and determination in Igbo culture. Okonkwo strives for all of these characteristics as though his life depends on it- and the reader finds him amassing many wives, expensive titles, a great deal of land, and a full barn early in life. Such a successful man has no time for listening to foolish stories: he makes his own luck and his own wisdom. “ Okonkwo both loathes the memory of his father and represses the lore of his mother” (188). It is simple enough for Okonkwo to shape his behaviour around what his father is not, and be rewarded for this behaviour by his culture. However, without any specific personal examples with which to form a framework of the male and the female, Okonkwo must resort to cultural context to develop his identity: washing his hands to dine with kings. “ In the process he distorts both the masculine and the feminine by keeping them rigidly apart and by the ferocity of his war on the ‘ feminine’. (188)¹ In Okonkwo’s determined hatred of his father’s ways, he abolishes those traits which would allow him an understanding of the feminine. Okonkwo’s concept of women in general is controverted several times by impressions of individual female characteristics, such as his willful daughter, Ekwezi. ““ She should have been a boy,’ he thought as he looked at his ten-year old daughter” (2893). The contradictions can be so open that even he must acknowledge the irony. If Umuofian culture both spites Unoka while rewarding Okonkwo, while providing him with the framework for his skewed perspective, then Igbo culture itself must have inherently patriarchal elements. Culturally tolerated wife-beating and unequal opportunities for the sexes are only two examples. Achebe does bring criticism with the novel written to open minds and undo stereotypes. Besides shedding light on the Igbo’s patriarchal features, he

focuses on those customs which are founded in fear and insecurity. Into the Evil Forest go inauspicious twins to die, people infested with 'evil' diseases and the unknown magic of deceased medicine men: they are all offerings to the 'heart of darkness' that is the Evil Forest. The undeniable presence of these customs, however, does not rule out all other aspects of Igbo culture. To simplify an entire culture into black and white terms of morality is to fall into the trap of Okonkwo. As mentioned before, however, Igbo culture rests on a fine balance. Many examples of feminine aspects in culture are overlooked by Okonkwo but not the discerning reader. During Okonkwo's lingering shame for his father, he relates a story of the powerful priestess known as Agbala. "She was full of the power of her god, and she was greatly feared" (2866). Women can obtain such a high status, and are actually integral to the workings of the society. Chapter five relates that it is women who are the chief domestic architects. Okonkwo again ignores feminine power in the concept of bride-price, illustrated in chapter eight and again in fourteen. A young man must pay for the privilege of marrying a young woman, and virgins are considered especially valuable. Okonkwo does not understand or accept the importance of women or their contribution to Igbo society. He screens all 'womanly' feelings of love, hope, joy and empathy from being communicated outwardly, but also fails to understand what he believes to be foolish feminine wisdom. Thus, Okonkwo only hears part of the story of his culture. He fails to notice the message of the egugwu's judgement of Uzowulu, the man whose wife ran away because of his beatings. Okonkwo fails to understand the significance of the powerful figure Ndulue considering his wife as a kind of equal. Consequently, even before

the catalytic arrival of the colonialist empire, Okonkwo was doomed to fall apart, excluded from his culture – ironically, to share the fate of his father. Although he fails to listen, Okonkwo is not without his own story. His story begins in shame of his father's exclusion and builds into a consuming fear. While this fear accumulates into contempt for his father's ways, it also prevents him from heeding the lore of his mother – thereby distorting the true wisdom of his ancestors into prejudice and stereotype. Ironically, that which shapes Okonkwo – fear, contempt and a stereotypic frame of reference- is strongly paralleled in the pattern of colonizers such as the district commissioner, who callously remarks on Okonkwo's suicide. Thus, Achebe has forged together a tale of hope and tragedy in " Things Fall Apart." By falling apart, Okonkwo shows that Umuofia actually embraces the female and the male to become whole. Empathy, hope and joy are abundant in the Igbo culture and in this story for those who are willing and able to hear them.

Works Cited and Consulted
Achebe, Chinua. " Things Fall Apart. The Norton Anthology of World Literature: The Twentieth Century Volume F. Eds. Sarah Lawall and Maynard Mack. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. 2860-2948.
Cobham, Rhonda. " Problems of Gender and History in the Teaching of Things Fall Apart. " Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: A Casebook. Ed. Isidore Okpewho. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 12-20.
Jeyifo, Biodun. Okonkwo and His Mother: Things Fall Apart and Issues of Gender in the Constitution of African Postcolonial Discourse, Callaloo. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
Scheub, Harold. ' When a Man Fails Alone. ' " Présence Africaine 74. 2 (1970): 61-89. On Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Rev. and rpt. As "

When a Man Fails Alone: A Man and His Chi in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. " Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. A Casebook. Ed. Isidore Okpewho. New York: Oxford UP, 2003. 95-122.