

Literature: things fall apart and the epic of gilgamesh essay



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Culture and morals are dynamic aspects of modern societies. The two are internally affected by the struggle between the forces longing for change and those advocating for the restoration of the status quo. The conflicting forces emanate from social structures and natural events taking place within and around the community. At times, the forces are brought about by external factors, which lead to social conflicts. As a result of these dynamics, new cultural models are created.

The greatest threat to culture and community may come from agents external to the group. The scenario is vividly illustrated in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Things Fall Apart*, where forces beyond the confines of the community affect its capacity to evolve and prosper. However, there are cases where the threats come from inside the community itself. *Gilgamesh* and *Okonkwo*, the heroes in the two works mentioned above, portray the important values of their respective communities. Both of them are ambitious. At the same time, however, the same characters exhibit deeply seated human and individual flaws. Ultimately, their unbridled ambitions cause turbulence in the society with regards to both culture and social cohesion. The disturbances brought about by the desires of *Gilgamesh* and *Okonkwo* have both positive and negative impacts on their communities.

In this analytical paper, the writer will review the two heroes and how their actions are related to social dynamics. The impacts of these characters on the society will be analyzed. To this end, the destructive and constructive nature of unrestrained ambition in the community will be highlighted.

Gilgamesh has internal flaws, just like a normal human being. The weaknesses are exhibited in his pride and indecisiveness. In the first part of the book, he is arrogant and offends the gods, leading to his punishment by Enkidu. He has a burning desire to gain supremacy in the society. The ambition made him kill the Bull of Heaven, irritating the gods again. The death of this bull resulted in Enkidu's demise. However, Gilgamesh's ambition to gain supremacy is not entirely destructive. For example, this desire helps him restore order in Uruk society. After the arrival of Enkidu, he changes his behavior and alters his ambitions (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 44).

Gilgamesh is a passive character. He cannot act on his own. He needs to be stimulated by external forces. For example, he only fights Humbaba after the arrival of Enkidu. After the latter's death, Gilgamesh longs for immortality, a desire that contributes to his downfall. By depending on external forces, he fails to fully execute his plans and ambitions. For example, he misses the chance to remain immortal after losing the plant of life to a serpent. He was waiting for a chance to test the plant on someone else, but the serpent took it away from him when he fell asleep. To this end, it appears that his ambitions and desires are also affected by gods. The intervention of these external forces informs the impacts of Gilgamesh's actions on the culture of the community. For example, if the gods are not involved, destruction is eminent. The destructive nature of the actions can only be averted if sacrifices and prayers are offered to the gods (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 39).

Gilgamesh actions lead to the emergence of forces meant to discipline his intolerable behavior. The development indicates the effects of his conduct on the cultural existence of the community. However, it is important to note <https://assignbuster.com/literature-things-fall-apart-and-the-epic-of-gilgamesh-essay/>

that these forces do not fully resolve the problems facing Uruk society. They are only meant to help the community maintain the status quo (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 99).

Gilgamesh's ambition to outdo 'a wild frontier' is both constructive and destructive to the community. He longs to stamp his name on the walls of the city in ruins. The name on the bricks is a monument to the gods. Enkidu warns him against becoming a promethean too fast. Instead, Gilgamesh is asked to be humble and to ask for permission from Shamash, the sun god. Enkidu says, "..... Oh my lord, if you enter that country, go first to the hero Shamash (...) tells the sun god, for the land is his (...) the country where the cedar is cut belongs to Shamash" (Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 49). Gilgamesh's actions are an affront to the gods. Anything that offends the gods is destructive to the community.

Enkidu is taken from 'a natural content' and forced to live with humans. The natural content is supposed to fight the uncouth behavior of Gilgamesh. The two characters are portrayed to be different. However, their qualities unite them for a common purpose. Enkidu struggles with the temptations of the civilized world. A prostitute woman is brought by the wild beasts to trap him. The sex made him not only weak, but also an outcast. His desires to save mankind are impacted on negatively by Gilgamesh's ambitions to fight him. Ultimately, the community is destroyed by the resulting civilization (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 93).

The Epic of Gilgamesh helps the reader to sift through the conventional classification of civilized and uncivilized traditions. By moving from one

cluster to the other, a character is able to recall what is lost or gained during the process. Enkidu gains wisdom during the transition phase. The scenario paints a picture of civilization and its effects on the people, including Gilgamesh and his ambitions. Gilgamesh's efforts to remain immortal amount to nothing (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 65).

In culture, there is destruction and renewal. It is a fact that external forces are part of this destruction and construction. However, the impacts of the external factors are moderated by forces within the community. Such forces include the desires and ambitions of the individuals. For instance, Gilgamesh crosses the water of death and he is questioned by Utnapishtim. He is asked "where are you hurrying?" (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 105). He responds by saying "there is no immortality" (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 106).

Utnapishtim provides Gilgamesh with a detailed account of the flood and how the actions of human beings offended the gods (The Epic of Gilgamesh, p. 2).

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua reveals that people are supposed to gain strength from their community. On its part, the community is expected to benefit from the actions of the members. In other words, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two phenomena (the community and the members). Okonkwo works on his ambitions with the help of the strength he gained from the community's customs. Conversely, the community gains from Okonkwo's hard work. The character struggles to remain strong for his sake and that of the society. In any case, the failure of those considered prestigious in the community is directly associated with the larger society.

Okonkwo's ambitions for superiority are both constructive and destructive, especially when his community comes into contact with other cultures. There is a struggle for dominance when two cultures clash. For example, Okonkwo lacks knowledge about Christianity and finds it difficult to understand the customs and beliefs associated with this faith. As a result, he becomes violent and destroys a church in his ambitions to protect his community. In the process, a church messenger is killed. His conduct is constructive to the community given that it safeguards the native cultural values. However, it is also destructive as it leads to divisions in the community.

For example, some clan members question Okonkwo's grounds for the killing (Things Fall Apart, p. 23). The questioning creates doubts about his leadership skills. However, his actions made some clans believe in him as a leader. Okonkwo also fought to protect his community from other hostile tribes. For example, the Umuofia people did not take it kindly when the neighboring clan of Obodoani regarded the death of a man during the week of peace as abomination. According to the community's cultural beliefs, "... this is a bad custom" (Things Fall Apart, p. 23). The incidence strained the relationship between the neighboring communities.

Individual ambitions may be beneficial to the community if they adhere to the values and aspirations of the society. However, they may become destructive when certain values are exploited at the expense of others. For instance, Okonkwo values his traditions so much. His sentimental attachments come with a price. To this end, his ambitions lead to the death of Ikemefuna. He is also forced to move away from his clan (Things Fall Apart, p. 53).

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The role of culture in directing individual ambitions is questionable in *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, the killing of Ikemefuna and the disastrous journey of Ezinma and Chielo leads to Okonkwo's expulsion from the community. The ambition to stick to his culture impacts both on his life and on the cultural framework of the community (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 53).

The perception of failure and success in a community is well illustrated in Okonkwo's ambitions. For instance, his desire to succeed in life is associated with his father's status in the society. Unoka is an affluent and influential member of Umuofia community. According to Okonkwo, reforms in the society are synonymous with failure. As a result, he is opposed to anything foreign to the community. He associates this opposition with masculinity. For example, he refers to those men who adopt Christian names as weak and effeminate. Nwoye changes his name to Isaac, and this makes him Okonkwo's enemy (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 48). The ambition protects the culture of the community, but also leads to conflicts between individuals.

The struggle between foreign and traditional values is constant. The struggle reflects Okonkwo's ambitions. To show their opposition, the people refuse to support his leadership after he killed Kotma, the messenger (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 43). The idea of losing all he has accomplished in life, including his fortune, title, and prestige, bothers Okonkwo. The possibility of losing these things makes him sad. He is especially disheartened considering that he did not inherit anything from his father.

The taboo associated with outcasts, which are referred to as the *osu*, contributes to the alienation of important members of the community. The

way the gods and oracles are perceived causes fear and uncertainties. The stability that is highly desired is not achieved. In Umuofia, the marginalization and discrimination of persons on the basis of weaknesses and kindness is prevalent. Men are judged depending on their masculinity and 'warrior-like' qualities. Okonkwo is not spared from these categorizations, especially due to his ambitions. Such skewed treatment of individuals creates more tension in the community, which opens doors for disruptive external forces. For instance, Unoka and Nwoye are considered weak due to their failures in life. They are labeled as *efulefu* or worthless persons (Things Fall Apart, p. 28). Okonkwo perpetuates marginalization of such people by looking down on them. His ambitions force them to try and find consolation in the hands of the missionaries.

There is a clash between the modern and the traditional societies. One may argue that Okonkwo is responsible for his downfall. He opts to take his own life, rather than watch the clan undergo change. His ambitions fail and he blames this on almost everything around him (Things Fall Apart, p. 55).

In this paper, the author highlighted the effects of individual ambitions in a community. The impacts of external forces are mitigated by these internal structures. The forces that destroyed Okonkwo and Gilgamesh came from within the society. Their uncontrolled desires in life made it possible for external agents, such as the British missionaries, to tear the social fabric apart. However, Gilgamesh's indecisiveness makes it hard for him to accomplish his ambitions alone. The inability is made evident after the death of Enkidu. On other hand, Okonkwo's stoic nature is both beneficial and destructive to him and to the community.

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