

**BEYOND THE VEIL OF SISTERHOOD: THE ANXIETIES BEHIND THE
UNMAKING OF THE HERO IN *THINGS FALL APART***

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ABSTRACT: This paper of mine very humbly aims to project as to how the celebrated literary titan, Chinua Achebe in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, has depicted the grand and tragic fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, who in his anxieties to prove himself as ‘masculine’ and strong, represses his inherent tenderness, his affections for his loved ones, and in his attempts to do so, he commits series of blunders starting from controlling the ‘sisterhood’ prevailing in his household, and rejecting his father as weak and ‘effeminate’ up to going against his own Igbo clan of his fatherland, Umuofia as he kills a European messenger and finally commits suicide.

KEYWORDS: Neurosis, Psychosis, Sisterhood, Repression

THE PAPER:

Chinua Achebe’s most celebrated novel, *Things Fall Apart* that is essentially depicting a pre-colonial and then a colonial Igbo society along with the rise and fall of its hero, Okonkwo, also has projected a theme of sisterhood both at a macro as well as a micro level. Okonkwo’s wives are found to share among themselves not merely their everyday responsibilities and the household chores, but also the various sorrows, joys and anxieties that have affected Okonkwo and his household. If his seniormost wife, Nwoye’s mother is the epitome of the most responsible eldest sister, then his youngest wife, Ojiugo is obviously like the fun-loving, free-spirited youngest one, whereas his second wife, Ekwefi is presented as a matured, responsible sister with her own independent perspectives, as someone who thinks

ahead of her time. Within this macro-sisterhood, a micro one can also be witnessed. The micro-sisterhood is between Ekwefi and her daughter, Ezinma who also happens to be Okonkwo's most treasured child whom her parents have almost lost like her elder siblings (the other children of Ekwefi and Okonkwo) whom the parents have not been able to save. As the novel progresses, it can be observed how Achebe has problematized his text to emphasize as to how Okonkwo, perpetually suffering from an anxiety of not to be regarded as weak, suffers a tragic downfall as he attempts to control the sisterhood, for instance, by beating his wives. He beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo during the Week of Peace thereby going against the indigenous Igbo clan. He shoots at Ekwefi to exhibit his vigor and wrath. Finally, his rifle explodes killing Ezeudu's son causing his Exile from his fatherland, Umuofia. Of course he never recovers his pre-Exile position and finally commits suicide thereby being reduced to a pathetic condition of an abomination to the mother-earth as per the belief of his Ethnic clan.

As the novel opens, Okonkwo's figure gives the impression that he is a strong man, but the author does not delay much to make it evident that Okonkwo's actions are mostly driven by a deep-rooted anxiety, that is, not to be considered as weak, because he believes that gentleness is a form of weakness which is very much a trait of an 'agbala', that is, a woman. Thus he is found to desperately try to project himself as a strong man in every possible way, for instance, by controlling his wives, thereby controlling the 'sisterhood' prevailing among his wives: "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 13).

However, that such actions of Okonkwo are basically anxiety-induced, is well evident in the author's words: "Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 13). Okonkwo has been in persistent fear and anxiety of not to be like his father, Unoka, who

has lived as a weak man with no title, no prosperity and has died of swelling, which, according to the-then Igbo belief, is an abomination to the earth. A strikingly contrasting picture can be observed in the household of another wise and prosperous man, Nwakibie whose help has enabled Okonkwo to shape his success. Nwakibie's eldest wife, Anasi is obviously like the eldest sister with responsibilities and utmost authority. So, it can be comprehended that a harmonious sisterhood prevails too in the household of Nwakibie who however, unlike Okonkwo who reacts furiously when he finds his youngest wife not at home, shows no sign of anger when he finds that apart from his four wives, his other wives due to some reason are not at home the day when Okonkwo has gone to Nwakibie to seek help by borrowing yam seeds. The contrast also can be perceived in the way Anasi is respected in Nwakibie's household as his seniormost wife, and the way Okonkwo reprimands and insults his eldest wife as he hands over Ikemefuna (who is sent to Umuofia from Mbaino as a compensation for the killing of Udo's wife) to her and she casually inquires her husband about the probable duration of the boy's stay in Okonkwo's household: "'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. 'When did you become one of the *ndicbie* of Umuofia?'" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 14).

However, the sisterhood prevailing among Okonkwo's three wives speaks of harmony and spontaneity, for instance, during the New Yam Festival, the three women's shared joy and excitement become well apparent as the author writes: "Okonkwo's wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had then drawn patterns on them in white, yellow and dark green. They then set about painting themselves with cam wood and drawing beautiful black patterns on their stomachs and on their backs" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 37-38). However, the festive mood is pretty soon thwarted by Okonkwo who quite unjustifiably beats his second wife, Ekwefi for cutting off some leaves from the banana tree of their household to pack food, and this serves as a vent for the return of some

“suppressed anger” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 38) of Okonkwo. It seems as if the author too attempts without any partiality towards his hero, to point out how without much justified reason, Okonkwo repeatedly tries to control, disturb and suppress the sisterhood existing in his household: “As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive. Okonkwo’s second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 38). As if that is not all, he aims his loaded gun at her and fires a shot and Ekwefi out of sheer luck has a narrow escape as the shot somehow misses her. This incident perhaps is a foreboding that the next incident, of course an accidental shot, will bring about his Exile which will catalyze his downfall.

Another very interesting sisterhood has been depicted as existing between Ekwefi and Chielo, the priestess of Agbala (the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves). Both share the anxiety to save Ekwefi’s only child with Okonkwo, Ezinma, especially as none of the children born to the couple before Ezinma has survived, and Ezinma, in spite of her otherwise jolly nature, has often been down with ailments threatening her life in her childhood. The author has stated: “She was particularly fond of Ekwefi’s only daughter, Ezinma, whom she called ‘my daughter’” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 49). Interestingly enough, unlike Chielo who refers to Ezinma as her daughter and accordingly showers her with her affection, Okonkwo who believes that any sort of display of affection and tenderness is essentially a weakness that suits a woman (which is why he is so desperate to rule his household with harshness thereby trying to control the sisterhood prevailing there), with his own hands kills Ikemefuna, the boy who has been gradually used to refer to Okonkwo as his father out of affection and trust, though even the oldest and wise man, Ogbuefi Ezeudu repeatedly forbids him to take any part in the killing of Ikemefuna as the boy calls him his ‘father’. But out of sheer anxiety to repress his love for the boy, Okonkwo kills him.

Okonkwo's controlling of sisterhood also affects the bringing up of the children in his household, moulding their attitudes and perspectives. The traditional folklores narrated to the children by his wives, are relevant not merely to enhance their imaginative faculties and the necessary bond among themselves and their mothers, but also to pass down the traditional myths and folklores (oral literature) to the young generations. Such an important role played by the sisterhood is controlled and suppressed by Okonkwo who believes that such acquaintance with the myths and folklores, and any attachment especially of his sons with their mothers is essentially a weakness that suits only women. Thus, in spite of the fact that Okonkwo's eldest son, Nwoye has developed a genuine fondness for such folklores narrated by the womenfolk of his father's household, has to pretend as if he presently nurtures a dislike towards such tales, now that he is growing up, in order to impress his father: "... he now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man. And so he feigned that he no longer cared for women's stories. And when he did this he saw that his father was pleased, and no longer rebuked him or beat him" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 54). Thus, Nwoye "would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 54).

These have led to an unintentional incident as Okonkwo flaunting his so-called masculine vigor with his gun repressing his innate tender feelings out of anxiety, accidentally kills Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son at Ezeudu's funeral as "Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 124). As per the traditional norms of the Igbo clan, Okonkwo must leave his fatherland, Umuofia because he has killed a clansman thereby committing a crime against the earth goddess, and his crime is a 'female' one "because it had been inadvertent" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 124). It is an irony that Okonkwo who has been always anxious to repress his tender feelings like, love for

his daughter, Ezinma, thinking that it exhibits weakness, a feminine trait according to him, commits a crime which is regarded as 'female' as per Igbo custom. He thus goes to his Involuntary Exile as he has to seek refuge in his motherland, Mbanta, from where he cannot return to his fatherland before seven years. At Mbanta, Okonkwo's uncle, his mother's younger brother, Uchendu reminds him that there is no greatness in demeaning femininity as he to help Okonkwo recover from the grief of being exiled to his motherland, points out: "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 134).

As Nwoye, being utterly and helplessly miserable since the murder of Ikemefuna, leaves his father to embrace Christianity, Okonkwo warns his five other sons that they must behave like a man: "If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 172). His grudge against anything that is feminine is so strong, that he persistently regrets that his most favorite child, Ezinma is not his son but his daughter. Okonkwo controls the sisterhood between Ezinma and her half-sister, Obiageli as he forbids them to marry in Mbanta as it is his motherland and expresses his wish to see his daughters marrying in Umuofia as it is his fatherland.

At Mbanta, Okonkwo tries to influence the clansmen to drive away the Christians which obviously will involve an open conflict with the Church as he wants the Christians to be chased "out of the village with whips" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 158). However, they refuse to do so, as a result of which Okonkwo tells himself inwardly that "This was a womanly clan" (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 159).

His anxiety, perceived in the way he has controlled the sisterhoods existing in his family among his wives and children, the way he has treated his male children, especially Nwoye (of course the way he commits the action of killing Ikemefuna with his own hands), his hatred

against his father, Unoka, whom he regards as weak and effeminate, highlights a certain Neurosis going on within him urging him to do such actions which, he believes, will project him as a paragon of strong masculinity. This basically ushers in a severe Psychosis as he goes against his own clan, acts without any wisdom as he kills the head messenger (European) out of an uncontrolled angst stemming from an impulse to avenge himself. This action itself severely alienates Okonkwo from his Igbo clan of his fatherland, Umuofia as the clansmen withdraw their sympathy and support for him as murmurs can be heard, “Why did he do it?” (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* 205). This leads to his final downfall as he commits suicide and reduces himself from the lofty status of a highly titled man revered in his clan, to the pathetic state of an abomination to the Earth (as per Umuofian norm). His clansmen cannot touch him or give him a decent burial. Okonkwo thus suffers the rejection and alienation which he has abhorred and dreaded and has been so much anxious to avoid throughout his life. Okonkwo suffers rejection from his son, Nwoye, just as he himself has rejected his father, Unoka, dies as an abomination to the Earth just like Unoka, and is alienated from his own clan of his fatherland, Umuofia at his death.

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