

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Irreversible Situation and the Articulation of Disorder in *Things*

Fall Apart

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* shows cultural disintegration in the Igbo people represented by the protagonist Okonkwo and some others. This paper will show how the disintegration of that community creates an irreversible condition for the protagonist. Okonkwo can neither change society nor himself. Consequently, his death is inevitable. However, the disintegration is expressed in many ways in the novel. Initially, the disorder is found on the personal level; gradually the whole community surrenders before it after the arrival of the colonisers with their government and religion.

Keywords: disorder, chaos, ambivalence, irreversibility, disintegration, cultural violence, toxic masculinity.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel that foreshadows disintegration in a community caused by contact with an alien worldview. This worldview is incomprehensible to the members of the society and, in the same way, the new worldview cannot comprehend the customs of the indigenous people. The Igbo people were locally governed: governed by the aged leaders and priests and priestesses of a particular region or village. They had rivalry among the villages, yet they had a particular (or systematic) way of fighting and attacking, and a system of punishment as well. Their customs, traditions and history held them together. Diana Akers Rhoads has rightly pointed out that Achebe portrayed African past with imperfection in it. But it does not require white men to change those imperfections. The system of development was within the Igbo community. When Okonkw broke the Peace of Ani beating his wife, Ezeudu said that earlier "a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a white this custom was stopped because it spoils the peace which it meant to preserve" (24). There is a conflict between the past and present here. A cultural violence is also predominant in this novel. However, here, cultural violence does not mean the violence between two different sets of cultural values rather it means cultural violence within a community following a particular set of beliefs, traditions, and rules (David Hoegberg).

Undoubtedly, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, one of the major colonial texts on the backdrop of Africa, not only shows colonial violence in the native land but it articulates the chaotic effect of colonialism on Africa and her people also. Yet, the chaotic effect of the alien administration and an incomprehensible religion is not felt by all, rather most of them are contributing to that disorder. In fact, Okonkwo only finds this disorder unbearable whereas others—even his son, Nwoye—are part of that chaos. From the colonial perspective, there is a condition most akin to colonial ambivalence which has been working since the advent of the colonizer. What is seen by Obeirika and Okonkwo as things-fall-apart, the District Commissioner finds it *peaceful* for them and plans to write a book entitled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. However, this paper does not intend to discuss the colonial ambivalence as the reason behind the hero's suicide nor as the reason for the hero's realization of the irreversible condition. Okonkwo is in conflict within himself and finds the disintegration within his community. *Irreversibility of Literature* has already been pointed out that the disorder in literature demands a correction or abolition, and when the situation somehow becomes

irreversible, that is, the condition cannot be reversed to its earlier position nor can it be corrected anyway the outcome deserves death, either murder or suicide or natural death.

Initially, the disorder arises out of Okonkwo's act of murdering Ikemefuna whom he treated like a son. Ogbuefi Ezeudu forbade: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death" (41). According to the cultural practice of Africa, the family must not get involved because the emotional attachment "might have for that individual would interfere with the process or the obligation to execute the demands of the Oracle" (Nnoromele 153). Yet at the penultimate moment, Okonkwo could not bear to be weak and murdered the boy. He had the desire to execute the duty of his clan. So, Okonkwo murdered Ikemefuna out of toxic masculinity but in the depth of his heart, he always loved that boy. Throughout his life, Okonkwo has always been at war with his society and with himself. He has tried to subdue his inner self under his public self. He wants to prove himself to be a great warrior and masculine figure in public. He murdered Ikemefuna because he "was afraid of being thought weak" (44). Nnoromele has already pointed out, "The death of Ikemefuna invoked varying or contrasting emotional reactions from both Okonkwo and Nwoye (Okonkwo's son) which dramatizes what Okonkwo apprehended as a dichotomy between strength and gentleness" (153). However, this dichotomy does not only occur between his "strength and gentleness" but also there is an ethical and familial conflict.

After his death, he could not wipe the image of the boy out of his mind: he always lacked someone as a son. When his daughter Ezinma brought some food for Okonkwo, two days after the death of Ikemefuna, he had the fantasy that "[s]he should have been a boy" (46). Later, after seeing Obierika's son, Maduka, he had the same feeling and said to his friend, "If I had a son like him I should be happy" (48). So, the murder of Ikemefuna was an immoral act not only because he disobeyed Ezeudu but also because he murdered someone more than his son. He broke away from the familial relationship between a father and a son. Obierika said to Okonkwo, "...if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it" (49).

Okonkwo was so depressed about the death of Ikemefuna that he (accidentally) shot the son of Ezeudu dead during the funeral rites of him. The narrator writes: "The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent" (91). This was

unconsciously done, driven by the frustration and despair of murdering Ikemefuna. It must be noted that it was Ezeudu who carried “the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves” (41) which pronounced to kill Ikemefuna. When Okonkwo heard the news of Ezeudu's death, he recalled it: “A cold shiver ran down Okonkwo’s back as he remembered the last time the old man had visited him. ‘That boy calls you father,’ he had said, ‘Bear no hand in his death.’ ” (88). Probably he considered Ezeudu responsible for Ikemefuna’s death. So, by murdering his sixteen-year-old boy, Okonkwo took revenge on Ezeudu for his son-like Ikemefuna’s death who was nearly the same age. So, it was not entirely accidental; the logic of the heart and passion worked behind the murder. However, in so doing, Okonkwo actually destabilised the divine order—man and God relationship. The narrator writes, “The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened” (91). Being wise and old among the villagers, everyone obeyed Ezeudu. The murder on the occasion of his funeral rites was really a heinous crime. So, Obierika, despite being a very close friend of Okonkwo, joined the army to burn the house of his friend who polluted the land,

It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. (91)

Till now, Okonkwo violates the order on two levels. On his personal level, he corrupted the father-son relationship by murdering Ikemefuna and on the divine level, the God and man relationship by disrespecting Ezeudu and murdering his son. On both levels the violation is irreversible. They cannot be undone or replaced. So the disorder cannot be corrected. The only possibility is abolishment. Truly he was banished from his village. But the banishment is temporary.

Till the end of Part One, the disorder is not caused by any colonial influence and advent of white strangers. It is the man who cannot maintain balance between his public responsibility and his individual duty called on the disaster. Part Two is a transitional phase when we find the people of Umuofia, especially those who failed to earn any recognition in Igbo people, that is, who failed earn any title, are converted to Christianity. However, returning after seven years, Okonkwo finds everything changed. He is not received like a warrior. On the cultural, social, and religious levels, he confronts a

different world. Beforehand, at the very beginning of Part Three of the novel, the conversation between Okonkwo and Obeirika reveals the transformation of the Heathen Igbo community to Christianity. Being a renowned clan, Okonkwo cannot bear such changes in his own community. For the sake of his community and religion, and to maintain his heroic impression, he sacrificed so many important things of his life. So, he wants to fight back against the white men who brought a 'lunatic religion' and a government. In the meantime, Okonkwo became happy hearing the news of the destruction of the church: "It was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior" (140). His idea of a real hero that he has been nurturing for a long time with other members of his community seems to be valid at this point. But this is temporary. The so-called 'peaceful administration' knavishly captured Okonkwo and other leaders of Umuofia. Significantly, there is no account describing how the twelve men of the District Commissioner handcuffed the six leaders of Umuofia. The narrator only says, "There was only a brief scuffle, too brief even to allow the drawing of a sheathed matchet" (141). Their heads were shaven, they were given nothing to eat and drink, and they were not even allowed to urinate and defecate, and thus, they were humiliated.

The humiliation can't be tolerated by Okonkwo anyway. He must take revenge on the white man. But the white man had enough power to create disorder among the African communities or they themselves called on the chaos allowing the white men to build a church on the evil land and so. For the Igbo communities, there is no difference between the church and the British Government. They came one after another and the structural similarity between them suggests their predominant connection: "The court-house, like the church was built a little way outside the village" (144). However, at present, Okonkwo finds nobody to support him and accompany him. When they are released from the court and start for their village, they seem to be strangers: nobody welcomed them rather they 'edged out of the way to let them pass' (144). Obeirika already hinted about the chaos while he spoke to his closest friend, Okonkwo, "If we should try to drive out the white men in Umuofia we should find it easy. There are only two of them. But what of our own people who are following their way and have been given power?" (128). Probably there was no answer to this question. Obeirika explained, "He [the white man] has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (129). The colonial ambivalence adds another disorder on another level. For Obeirika, the 'white man's court' is

corrupted because it favoured Nnama's family who 'had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter' (129). He came to the opinion that without understanding African communities, their people and their customs, the white man demolished them. The ambivalence started with the appearance of white men in them. Initially, they took it comically, they laughed at the language of the interpreter who belonged to their own community. Interpreter stands for the possible hybridity in Africa. The narrator says: "He [the white man] spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to ears to Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying 'myself' he always said 'my buttocks' " (106).

Nwoye represents the African people who were fascinated by Christianity and the church without comprehending them. Nwoye was born into a family which was controlled by the commands of his father. The (toxic) masculinity of his father built up hatred against him and gave way to his fascination with softness and musicality. He inherited his love for song, music, rhythm, and tales from his grandfather Unoka. So, when he found his elderly friend Ikemefuna murdered by his father, it was unbearable to him. It was not his hatred for pantheism nor was it the doctrine of Christianity that he was converted. The narrator is ironic in expression:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it it was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul—the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. (108)

He did not understand when Mr Kiaga said, "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake" but "he was happy to leave his father" (112). Nwoye's conversion to Christianity creates a great impact on his father. Okonkwo foresees the fruitlessness of his heroism: "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (113).

However, presently, Okonkwo can anticipate what will happen to Umuofia. So, at night, he decides, "If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself" (145). Here, suicide has already been decided. What is left is for the readers—the physical representation of the chaos in the community after the meeting. Nobody supported

Okonkwo. Rather they wonder why he killed the messenger who asked to stop the meeting immediately.

The shattered and defeated warrior observes:

He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’ (149)

The ‘tumult’ is suggestive of disorder in the people of Umuofia: amidst them, Okonkwo is a stranger. Okonkwo, ‘one of the greatest men in Umuofia,’ is now defeated, not by the white men, but by his own people when things fall apart. He committed suicide after confronting his people astray from the equilibrium they once had. Nnoromele probably failed to comprehend the tradition of Igbo society. He blamed the notion of an Igbo hero for the suicide of Okonkwo (Nnoromele 154). It is rather Okonkwo’s consciousness of being a warrior in Igbo society¹ and consequently, his failure to bear with the changes of that society. Okonkwo is a person who always prioritized heroism above everything. His hatred for his idle father and son, and murder of Ekemefuna are the manifestations of the hero syndrome.

His suicidal act is not caused by any single act. But it is a natural consequence of all the major incidents that took place in his life: Ikemefuna’s death, murder of Ezeudu’s son, Nwoye’s fascination with church and conversion to Christianity, invasion of Christianity in Mbanta and Umuofia, Okonkwo’s confrontation of a new people when things have fallen apart, all contributed to a chaotic situation. Okonkwo is the one who cannot bear such disorder in his community; whereas many others “did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation” (130). Interestingly, Achebe starts the novel with the birth of a hero and ends with the death of that hero. The first three paragraphs focus on Okonkwo’s physical valour, his victory over Amalinze the Cat, and the celebration of it with ‘drum beats and the flutes’ (3). “That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo’s fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their out-houses could hear him breathe” (3). On the contrary, in the

¹ In fact, the notion of the hero that Okonkwo nurtured in his mind is not very alike to that of other of his community. He beat his wife during peace, murdered Ekemefuna despited being forbidden by Ezeudu, and murdered Ezeudu’s son during funeral rites. These actions are sufficient to consider that Okonkwo’s notion was different from others. Even his closest friend Obeirika cannot agree with him.

end, Okonkwo is humiliated by the white men, handcuffed, shaven-headed, prisoned, hungry and thirsty, yielding to the authority, alien in his own community, without support from them, and finally, his dead body dangling from the tree. The Igbo custom adds to his wretchedness: “It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it” (151).

In the beginning, Okonkwo’s notion of an ideal warrior fit with that of the Igbo community—he was acclaimed by his clan. But when the community itself has changed (or torn apart), the same notion does not fit with them. It is not the problem of his community but the problem of the individual who cannot conform to that society, nor can he change his community to the earlier state. Okonkwo does not represent the Igbo people as a whole. Achebe has created a tragic hero who is exceptionally violent and who cannot conform to the changes in the community. He is a man with pride in nurturing the traditional notion of an Igbo warrior. He finds it very difficult to equalize his notion with that of most of the others. On the other hand, he has always tried to find equilibrium between his personal values and social values which he never could and now he cannot maintain. Consequently, first Ikemefuna and then Nwoye were victimized. Now it is his turn as there is nobody else to share his punishment, nobody to suffer. So his death is inevitable and being unable to yield before the change Okonkwo must commit suicide.

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