



## OKONKWO'S INNER WEAKNESS IN *THINGS FALL APART*: A REVIEW

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### Abstract

*The present research paper, Okonkwo's inner weakness in Things Fall Apart, is an attempt to analyze the inner drives and over ambitious nature of the protagonist of the novel cause to create inner conflicts. Okonkwo's each action and decision has the impulse of being aggressive, showing manliness and ruling with high hand. His obsession to be a man and one of the rulers of his clan has created conflicts within him and later on these conflicts have created weakness in his character. His ambitious nature and inner weakness did not permit him to accept the fact that his clan was no longer with him and could not hold the old order. Hence he committed suicide and ended his life in tragic manner.*

### Keywords

*Conflict, Exploitation, Christianity, British Administration, Ritual, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

Chinua Achebe is one of the most acclaimed African writers. Achebe's writings deals with the rich African heritage and Igbo culture, various conflicts between Igbo traditions and Christian modernity, between protagonist and his own community, between the natives and the colonizers, the exploitation of natives at various levels, oppression of the natives and their conversion into Christianity, imposition of Western religion, education and English language, corruption of money, power and natural resources, independence and disillusionment of the natives, and the responsibility of the leaders, intellectuals, elite people and citizens of a newly independent nation. Chinua Achebe's novels can be studied in a variety of ways such as an anthropological studies, postcolonial discourse, novels as history, African heritage, the traditional Igbo culture, and writing back to the centre and so and so forth. Achebe's first three novels are a faithful picture of different conflicts within the protagonists and within the community, and conflicts between the two cultures. It can be observed that Achebe's protagonists are embodiments of heroic qualities and nature. But there are some flows within them and these flows create some kind of conflicts.

The conflicts have created weakness in Okonkwo. One can define the word conflict that two or more persons, ideas, groups of people may have different beliefs, values and they create contradictory situation between them. Whenever it comes to any society, conflicts are inevitable because a society consists of people, groups, different beliefs and worldviews. Being social animal the members of a society are always in each other's contact, in such situations their thoughts, beliefs and ideas to which they stick often clash. Therefore, it can be said that when two different things or cultures meet the conflict is unavoidable.

Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* at a broader level is a novel of conflict between two cultures. The protagonist in the novel is a champion of his society and has some kind of flows in his character. He is ambitious and his ambition is to arise above all in his society. This ambition



creates some conflicts in his personality. Okonkwo's father Unoka died worthless, penniless and without taking any title from the clan. He lived a coward life. Hence, he is called a woman. He died in debt. Contrary to this Okonkwo wants to be a man of worth, prosperous and has the ambition to win all the titles in his clan. He is possessed by the wish of becoming a successful man and one of the rulers of Umuofia. The unsuccessful life lived by his father and the success myths of his community create conflicts in his personality. Thus, "he had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father" (Achebe, 04). Okonkwo is exactly opposite to his father. He has two barns full of yams. Whereas Unoka lived poor life and his wife and children had barely enough food to eat. Unoka was coward and could not bear the sight of blood and "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars" (Achebe, 06). On the other hand Okonkwo "was a man of action, a man of war" (Achebe, 10), and always ready to fight war with the enemies of his clan. Okonkwo has five human heads to his credit. He is always passionate about his position in his community and wants to be one of the lords of the clan. Harpreet Pruthi (as cited in Dhavan, 1994) remarks on Okonkwo's ambition, "Driven by this private obsession, Okonkwo has only one aim in life to succeed and to succeed in terms of warfare, wrestling, wealth and status" (Achebe, 137). But Okonkwo's father died poor and indebt of many people and created stigmatized identity in his clan so the "People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him anymore because he never paid back" (Achebe, 05).

Contrary to his father, Okonkwo can be easily believed by his people. When Okonkwo needs first seed yams, he goes to Nwakibie, a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village. Nwakibie has refused many men to lend seed yams but he trusts Okonkwo and lends him twice four hundred yams because Okonkwo is well known throughout his village for his hard work at his farm. Okonkwo always thinks to be strong, respectful and behaves like a man. And to be a man, he hates emotions like fear, cowardice, and weakness. His ambition to be great is conspicuous when he says to Nwakibie, "a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness" (Achebe, 19). This assertion clears Okonkwo's hidden wish to rise above all men in his clan through the way of honesty, hard work and following norms of his traditional values. However, one can observe that Okonkwo's wish to be richer and respectful man is an outcome of his fear complex, "And indeed he was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life and shameful death" (Achebe, 18). His father's failure is the driving force in Okonkwo and the same has created a kind of conflict in him. The fear of falling from the standards of the clan, the fear to be compared with Unoka and the fear to be called *Agbala* means a woman, dominate his family life.

He expects his sons to be strong and act like a man. He is not only respected in his own village but the neighboring villages too. When he is sent to Mbaino as an emissary, he is received with great respect, and they treat him like a king. Achebe has placed Okonkwo opposite to his father Unoka and has bestowed on him the qualities of a man. This manliness in him caused his conflict with his father and feminine emotions when he was alive. His starving to be a man of value creates many complexities within him and also causes his doom at last.

There are many incidents in the novel which depict the inner clashes of Okonkwo. The narrator narrates his inner behaviour as,

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. 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. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic-It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father (Achebe, 13).



Once he finds his youngest wife Ojiugo has gone to plait her hair at her friend's house without preparing afternoon meal for him and her children. When Ojiugo returns, he ignores the *Week of Peace* and beats her very heavily. Gerald Moor shades lights on this beating, "we perceive that he is not as strong as he seems, since he is a man driven by a fear of failure, who feels the constant need to prove himself more manly than others" (115). Then he observes that his elder son Nwoye does not behave like a man. Okonkwo imposes his ideals of manliness on his son. He wants Nwoye to be a man and a great farmer. For Okonkwo Yam stands for manliness, and a man who is able to feed his whole family with yams from one harvest to next, is really a strong man. But he sees signs of laziness in Nwoye. He threatens him, "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands. And if you stand staring at me like that," he swore, "Amadiora will break your head for you!" (Achebe, 33)

Okonkwo always encourages his sons by telling stories of manliness, full of violence and bloodshed. All he wants that his elder son Nwoye must grow into a tough young man, who can rule his household after him. In this way, he tries to develop his sons in terms of strong and fierce manhood. Okonkwo never shows his love for his children, and the boy Ikemefuna who is in his care, "Okonkwo never showed any emotions openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (Achebe, 28). He always hates the prominent feelings of his father 'gentleness and idleness' to prove himself a man. Okonkwo is over whelmed by the manliness and unconsciously ignores the base of his society which achieves its equilibrium from the balance between male and female principles. In the village meeting, an old man wants to put his opinion without any bad intention about Okonkwo, but in a moment Okonkwo rises and remarks, "This meeting is for men" (Achebe, 19). This shows his temper towards the unsuccessful persons because the old man has not won any title. As for him a man without title is worthless. Prof. Jaya Laxmi Rao comments on Okonkwo's such behaviour, "Okonkwo's sole concern is to realize his ambition to become a man of success rather than of value" (Achebe, 20). In this way, whenever he confronts any person with feminine qualities or emotions, Okonkwo hates him. Moreover, he faces any event or incident with manliness and strength.

Umuofia has got a boy, Ikemefuna as compensation and is living in Okonkwo's family since last three years. The *Oracle of Hills and Caves* pronounces death of Ikemefuna. Ezeudu, a great warrior and titled old man warns Okonkwo not to bare his hands in Ikemefuna's murder because the boy calls him father. Okonkwo could have avoided his participation in the execution of divine justice on Ikemefuna but to prove his manliness, he executes the justice. The scene of Ikemefuna's murder is very pathetic. A group of elders from nine villages of Umuofia and Okonkwo take the boy in the forest. They walk in a line Ikemefuna is in the middle. The man behind Ikemefuna

.. cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow-he heard Ikemefuna cry, "My father they have killed me!" as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak (Achebe, 61).

This act of killing Ikemefuna shows Okonkwo's clash with values. The fear gives him strength but the tenderness in him cannot allow him rest for some nights. He does not take his meal for two days and drinks wine throughout these days. He tries his best not to think of the boy but he cannot do away the thoughts, "Now and then a cold shiver descended on his head and spread down his body" (Achebe, 63). The fear of failure creates an imbalance in his personality, and he is torn between the fulfillment of private self and demands of public action. Prof. Jago Morrison views





this imbalance in Okonkwo's personality as, "Okonkwo's tragedy is precipitated by his fear of an inability to embrace the feminine within him" (Achebe, 20).

Several other events reflect his aggressiveness which is driven by his inner conflict. His participation in the funeral function of Ezeudu, the greatest warrior and one of the old men in Umuofia, is one such event. In the procession, he inadvertently commits the crime against his own motherland by killing a young son of the dead Ezeudu. The scene is very pathetic. While performing the funeral ritual, Okonkwo's gun explodes and a piece of iron hits the boy. According to religious rites, Okonkwo has to flee for seven years into exile. He goes to his maternal village, Mbanta with his family. Though Okonkwo has killed the son in the funeral rite, this killing is inadvertent. But Prof. Jaya Laxmi Rao holds the opinion that it is irresistible urge in him to be aggressive especially in public indicates Okonkwo's misdeed than an accident. This incident of killing can be seen as an example of his conflict with values and of his personal gain. During his stay at Mbanta, the colonial forces capture his village Umuofia and spread their administration. It also replaces Igbo religion with Christianity and creates a new order out of the traditional life of Umuofia. When Okonkwo returns after seven years, he cannot find his religion, rituals and the traditional life and his position among the Umuofians. He wants to reestablish his religion and traditional way of life and his position among the Umuofians by fighting with British administration. For this purpose he tries to convince his people but they do not agree and support him and he lives a restless life.

### Conclusion:

In this way, Achebe tries to represent the inner conflicts of the protagonist. He could not balance the feelings and emotions like tenderness, bravery, manliness, aggressiveness and the feminine qualities. His wish to be a man of authority, one of the rulers of his clan and to win the height title over dominates his personality. He always tries to prove his manliness and greatness; he suppressed his tender emotions and this gave way to various conflicts in him. He became weak emotionally and could not overcome out of this weakness and ends his life.

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