

Chapter Two

FROM REPRESSION TO DISPLACEMENT: A PSYCHOANALYTIC REEXAMINATION OF THE HERO IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

The protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been variously described by critics as a hero or an anti-hero owing to his conformity or otherwise to the concept of heroism depending on the perspective from which each critic appraises his actions and behavioural traits. From the classical to the modern, there have been myriad definitions of heroism. Even in the Igbo society from which the protagonist of the novel is located, certain qualities of a hero in their perception and perspectives are observable in the protagonist, yet, he dies almost unsung by his people. Was the protagonist his people's hero? This paper addresses the issue through a reexamination of the concept of heroism from a psychoanalytic perspective. It reassesses the qualities of the protagonists in the light of unconscious motivations of behaviour or about actions and factors responsible for them in order to identify or determine the type of heroism that obtains in this narrative. Closely examining his childhood or his past, the paper attempts to explore how the repressed materials in the protagonist's memory, become a propelling force for his acts of heroism or villainy. Based on the analyses of the protagonist's unconscious, the paper concludes that he is not an Igbo hero.

Introduction

Since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, much critical works have been written in appreciation of Achebe's creative efforts and the novel's significance in the African literary space. The novel continues to yield new meanings at each reading. A work written to set the score right about ancestral Africa, as the writer claims, continues to unearth different and newer issues about the African past, as well as how this past affects the present African society. This novel, which arguably brought into fiction in English a comprehensive African world-view, also reveals some contradictions inherent in a well-organized social structure. Some of the contradictions encouraged individual hard work and the up-lift of individuals from lowly backgrounds to affluence and positions of influence. But the same society has a structure that accelerates a man's downfall almost as speedily as he rose to prominence. It was a society in which religiosity impacted negatively on people. As Chinyere Nwahunanya posits, "members of the society... live in perpetual fear, not just the fear of the supernatural influence of the gods and their decrees, but also the fear of the possible abuse of the existing norms and sanctions by the votaries of these god..." (227). The heroism or otherwise of

anyone in this society depended to a great degree on the gods. One had to agree with his personal god (chi) in order to succeed in life.

From the above background, the following questions are imperative: To what extent did the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* agree with his personal chi? How much of his psychological makeup contributed to the character traits that eventually pushed him to a tragic end? How some of these and other factors contribute or are responsible for the heroism or downfall of some individuals in Igbo societies, is of concern to this study, especially as they relate to the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. This paper proceeds with an attempt to demonstrate that the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a failed hero before undertaking a psychoanalytic reexamination of his character traits in order to unravel the unconscious determinants of his behaviour.

Alfred Kazin had contended that only unconscious factors with a high emotional value are significant in literary creation (325). Similarly, only highly emotionally charged situations and factors are worthy of critics' attention in literary criticisms. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the motives behind the behaviour of his protagonists continue to agitate critics' minds. Some of these actions or behavioural traits have very high emotional value since some of them border on decisions that have to do with life and death or even relationships between members of society. This is the reason we consider a psychoanalytic appraisal of this novel necessary. Even though much of the intellectual force of Freudian psychoanalysis have been questioned and disparaged by critics and even Freud's contemporaries, its importance for the understanding of intellectual culture is undisputable. Nevertheless, the concern of this paper is to utilize some of the principles enunciated by Sigmund Freud, considered the father of psychoanalysis, as a veritable critical instrument to reexamine the actions of the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in order to unravel the motivations or motives behind his actions in the novel. The biologist E.O. Wilson once called for 'Consilience' (the interlocking of perspectives) between the realms of knowledge. And the dimension which literary criticism has taken in recent times indicates that critics have not only heeded this call for 'consilience', but such literary direction has come to stay. Literary criticism should involve the ability of the critic to treat works of literature not only as artifacts which ought to be analyzed in terms of their rhetorical structure, but also in terms of the individual voices and visions, as well as psychological dispositions of characters in the works. This kind of critical attitude ensures the purity of art as well as expands its scope as a tool for a better understanding of human traits.

The above position statement informs the present reexamination of Chinua Achebe's protagonist in *Things Fall Apart* in order to rediscover fresh and illuminating facts about the actions and motivations of the protagonist of this classic. Literary works are areas in a state of flux, which may not be read in similar ways or from particular perspectives by differentiating audiences. They are not a homogenous body of works with similar characteristics. Therefore,

they should be seen as sites of struggle where meanings are contested, and which may not also possess timeless and universal values and truths. In literature there is a strong and firm sense of fluidity that must always be respected in literary criticism. In this paper, I intend to establish that contrary to some critics' positions about the heroism of the protagonist of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo, though a tragic hero, is not his own people's hero. The paper contends that Okonkwo is consumed by arrogance, aggression, pride, tendency to dominate, excessive anger or impatience, lack of intellectual acumen, and some other complexes that are not considered acts of heroism in the tradition in which he comes from. His mien is at contradistinction with the expectations of his people and even with those of others in the same society who possess admirable and heroic qualities by the standard of the Umuofia people. Okonkwo's dispositions seem inappropriate for the preservation of social stability. As a psychoanalytic critical study, the paper will attempt to unravel those repressed materials that unconsciously control the actions and mis-actions of the protagonist throughout the narration in order to demonstrate that Okonkwo cannot qualify to be Umuofia's hero. This will be after establishing how he fails as Umuofia's hero.

HEROISM, IGBO WORLD-VIEW AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

Willie Harris in 'Chinua Achebe's Challenge to Western Mythos' attempts a comparison of the western notion of heroism with that of the African oral tradition. It is important to observe that most of the qualities of a hero in the African oral tradition apply to the hero of the Igbo society. Some of these distinguishing characteristics of the African hero include the absence of classification into tragic or epic types. Irrespective of the genre from which these heroes emerge, there are similarities among them across African cultural groups. Harris (referring to Okpewho, Johnson and Ford) identifies the similarities and characteristics of the African hero to include the following:

1. Usually of noble birth; exceptional qualities (usually physical strength, domineering personality)
2. Problems in the father/son relationship
3. Commits grave sin, violates oracular decree, or offends king
4. Usually forced into exile; exile is catalyst to heroic quest
5. Hero-in-making usually acquires significant wealth or recognition before exile – so exile suggests failure, decline
6. Loneliness/bitterness of exile become forgers of character
7. Mother, lover, sister,, or male kin (usually uncle or brother) play important instructive, "helper" roles
8. After return from exile, the 'matured' hero becomes reintegrated into the society as a leader. (Harris, 213).

Undoubtedly, Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* fits adequately into the African heroic model. The fact that his birth was not noble is a discursive strategy by Achebe to demonstrate that the Igbo society did not emphasize kingship or sole rulership from where such births would have emanated. Okonkwo rises from a common birth and from poverty to a position of influence in order to make himself unapproachably distant and different from the common people. This is commonplace in delineating most African heroes. To that extent, Okonkwo is an African hero. Nevertheless, there are ways in which his heroism fails to meet the standard of heroism of the people he supposedly leads or sacrifices his life to protect from alien forces. Why then is he not qualified to be an ‘Umuofian’ hero?

In answering the above question, we may not attempt a point-by-point comparison between the model of African epic hero and heroism in Umuofia society. We will emphasize more the qualities Umuofia would normally expect from their hero or leader. Leadership to this community is almost synonymous with heroism. Though Umuofia is an African society, the social and political structures of most African societies were not homogenous and therefore, social relations did not follow a uniform pattern. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe presents a unique Igbo community that places high premium on social harmony. Even though the culture stresses the worth of every man and woman, it encourages and values highly their communal existence and social stability and anyone who perpetrates any act considered inappropriate to the preservation of this stability is considered more as an enemy than a friend. Okonkwo does not seem to understand the dynamics of this social structure and therefore seems to work alone towards a direction he wrongly thinks his people are headed.

Achebe presents a few admirable characters that are both respected and highly regarded in the different societies in the novel. From different parts of Umuofia and Mbanta, we encounter highly placed members of these communities; respected by their people; and are role models in those societies. Okoye, for instance is a skilful orator. When we encounter Okoye, he is about to take the second to the highest title in Umuofia clan. He is wealthy, highly influential and above all possesses the power of oratory. People like Okoye would be considered more heroic in this community. Oratory is a virtue here because: “Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (TFA 5). Most of the men of integrity mentioned in the narrative possess the power of oratory and they command the respect and followership of their people with this endowment.

Okika is described as a great man and an orator. People like Ogbuefi Ezeugo, a “powerful orator”, use their oratorical skills to come to the community’s rescue at critical times. Ezeugo

is an inspirer and provides useful insights into issues. Ogbuefi Ezeudu is an exemplary character in Umuofia. Besides being the oldest man in Okonkwo's quarter of Umuofia, he had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and is accorded great respect in all the clan. He is an intelligent man, wealthy and has dignity. He is one of those leaders the people look up to. Even Okonkwo's friend, Obierika ranks higher than Okonkwo in terms of exacting positive impact on the people of Umuofia. He is a very intelligent and thoughtful person. He is 'a man who thought about things'. Wise counsel can only result from thoughtfulness and anyone who should be a leader of a people's hero must be one who reflects on things. Those who possess the power of oratory and intelligence have used these skills and endowment to convince the people against engaging in needless and senseless conflicts or wars on some occasions. Above all, these characters identified above have respect for other members of the society, including the opposite sex. These are virtues which anyone that must aspire to heroism and leadership must possess. The protagonist of the *Things Fall Apart* lacks all these qualities and therefore in the eye of the Umuofians is not a hero.

This is not to argue that only orators are heroes. The contention rather is that in this society, heroism is not determined by violent actions alone. A hero must combine physical prowess with high intellectual ability. But Okonkwo is lacking in intelligence and is never critical in appraisal of situations. This is observable in his involvement in Ikemefuna's death. He does not consider the implication of Ogbuefi Ezeudu's advice not to have a hand in the boy's death. He allows his violent instincts to overwhelm him, and he personally ends the boy's life.

Okonkwo is not a good speech maker. And because he does not possess this vital tool of influence and leadership by Umuofia standard, he is always in conflict with members of the society whenever he opens his mouth. He is a failed hero as far as Umuofia is concerned. He would rather use his fists, which often results in situations that cause disharmony in the community. Okonkwo has more brawn than brain. He is not a man of ideas and only men of ideas have the capacities to be heroes. He excels in only areas involving physical strength like being "the proud and imperious emissary of war" (9). He beats up members of his family at will. He abuses people anyhow. Even when he attends any gathering, he is only located where violence is involved. He is afraid of and despises people endowed with those qualities he lacks, especially the power of oratory, like Egonwanne. Okonkwo is a proud man and his father in his dying days acknowledges this: "You have a manly and a proud heart" (18). Because of pride he commits some avoidable blunders.

It is incontestable that in Umuofia, heroism is not about bravery alone. A hero must also be respectful to other members of the society, including the weaker sex. He must be intelligent and above all he must possess the ability to impress and convince the people whenever

situations arise. Even outside the fictional world, eloquence and oratory are non-negotiable in leaders of most democratic societies. But we are convinced that Okonkwo does not possess most of the qualities required of a true and successful hero. Instead, we have a very aggressive and violent, rash, irascible, proud, egoistic, uncalculating character. We have a character that seems not in control of his actions and therefore always plunging from one problem to another as a result of so much irrationality. We are convinced that contrary to Emeka Nwabueze's position, Okonkwo is a failed hero. Nwabueze contends that: "in Okonkwo's Umuofia, one is considered a hero if he avenges himself on someone who has done unpardonable harm to his integrity and bravely takes his own life in defiance of any intended consequences." (213). But if this society were sympathetic to Okonkwo and his methods, his death would not have been considered abominable by his people. Okonkwo rather thinks that heroism is only about accomplishments, valour, fortitude and extraordinary courage, thereby misinterpreting his society's expectations. He fails to realize the dual nature of the linguistic structure of a people that places premium on language. The fact that one is brave or courageous does not imply that one should go out of one's way killing innocent people and beating harmless ones. He does not understand the bounds of what society expects from him. But we will like to find out why he behaves the way he does. In the next section, we shall attempt to reexamine his behaviour based on psychoanalytic concepts of 'repression' and 'displacement' in order to identify the unconscious factors that seem responsible for his actions.

Repression, Displacement and the Protagonist in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Most researchers on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* have limited their analyses so much to its thematic preoccupation, and particularly on the cultural and social aspects. These critics diminish the importance of Achebe's narration by not paying adequate attention to the psychological aspects. In the present endeavour, we discover that examining the behavioural traits of the protagonists is necessary in understanding reasons for his 'rash' and violent dispositions most of the time in the narration. As has been pointed out, Okonkwo behaves like someone seemingly driven by forces within him, of which he is ignorant. And these forces are repressed materials which had been lodged within his unconscious from his childhood. We have to note that the unconscious comes into being when we are young through **repression**; the expunging from the consciousness, of unhappy psychological events. Also, the content of the unconscious need not necessarily be from one's childhood alone, but may include any event that may be consigned to an individual's past. Even in our adult life, we still make conscious efforts to repress some thoughts and desires which clash with our social values. Those materials are equally stored in our unconscious.

On the other hand, **displacement** is a defence mechanism. It is a defence against the pain the ego would suffer if the experience is allowed access to consciousness. According to Frederick Hoffman, “the repressed instinct does not ‘give up’ when it is denied entrance into consciousness. It expresses itself digressively, disguisedly, in ‘derivatives’ (31). In order to elaborate this devious method of conforming to the external world, Hoffman goes on to contend that this mechanism of displacement “disfigures and distorts the manifest dream so that the unconscious wish is not recognizable” (39). In Sigmund Freud’s own words: “...he can displace and he can exchange; instead of one silly idea, he can adopt another of a slightly milder character; from one precaution of prohibition he can proceed to another; instead of one ceremonial rite, he can perform another. He can displace his sense of compulsion, but he cannot dispel it” (271). And these two psychoanalytic concepts apply to the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, as we shall discover subsequently.

Chinyere Nwahunanya describes Okonkwo’s actions as ‘repulsive’, ‘brutal’ and ‘violent’ (229), while Kofi Owusu agrees that Okonkwo “exercises absolute power in his household through a combination of implacable will and brute force.” (MFS 459). In fact Achebe presents him as domineering and aggressive or even exceptionally violent:

he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father” (TFA, 3). Okonkwo also “ruled his household with a heavy hand (9).

All these are well known descriptions of Okonkwo’s traits, and they are such that have a lot of psychological implications. They are actions that result from compulsive instincts, which require a psychoanalytic critical investigation to identify unconscious determinants for those behavioural traits. In other words, why does Okonkwo behave the way he does?

Some people have attempted to explain the motivating factors behind his character traits. Clement Okafor claims that Okonkwo is a man who harboured so much hatred against his father, that “he instinctually hates everything that reminds him of Unoka” (Emenyonu 89). And this drives him to his numerous rash actions in the narrative. These may suggest some weaknesses in the character of Okonkwo, but they are the human elements that will build up the ‘*harmatia*’ of the hero. Besides, he is a character driven by forces within him of which he is unaware. And the manner the materials within the unconscious are displaced to those manifest ones that make us recognize the hero in *Things Fall Apart* concerns us in this study.

As a child, Okonkwo was exposed to unforgettable experiences that were unpalatable. We are told that Okonkwo's father was "lazy and improvident and was incapable of thinking about tomorrow." (TFA 3). He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. Besides the poverty, Unoka (Okonkwo's father) was a debtor and a loafer: "if any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry" (3-4). He had taken no title and that was the trade mark of failures in that society. The knowledge of this about his father would have been very terrible for the young Okonkwo's mind. In addition to the knowledge, one imagines that his childhood must have been characterized by denials and poor parental upbringing. Not only would he have lived in lack, he must have had to contend with insults from his peer group and even fought on several occasions as a result.

It is important to establish why the early relationship between Okonkwo and his parents is necessary in this discourse. Melanie Klein's *Object Relations theory* is a theory of relationships between people in particular within a family and especially between mother and child. A basic tenet is that human beings are driven to form relationships with others and that failure to form successful early relationships leads to later problems. Melanie Klein considers the child's relations with the breast as significant. As the child feeds, it feels gratified and satiated when the breast produces sufficient milk, in which case it is loved and cherished. When the child is prematurely withdrawn, or the breast fails to produce sufficient milk or food, the child is frustrated; the breast is hated and becomes the recipient of hostile thoughts. It is instructive that if Unoka cannot feed his wife, the mother will not be able to give her children adequate 'mothering'.

As a growing young man, whose father had no yams or any crops to feed the family with, Okonkwo had to support his mother and two sisters from his meagre harvest. This also implied that he was supporting his father. To make matter worse, when Unoka died, he had to be taken to the evil forest to die. It was not only a shameful death, it was abominable. He did not have the privilege of a decent burial. Okonkwo was thoroughly ashamed of his father. No wonder, he lived on edge at whatever and whoever reminded him of his father, however remotely. It is one reason Nwoye's behaviour perceived by Okonkwo to be effeminate was a great source of worry to Okonkwo. He not only detested him, he transferred the same detestation and impatience to anyone who reminded him of his father. These are the materials that constitute the unconscious impulses or drives, which Okonkwo must evolve a mechanism to forbid or prevent access to conscious life. Let us now see how Okonkwo

managed to displace these repressed materials and how this attempt resulted in the various negative behavioural traits in his character.

The protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo is heavily flawed as a hero, especially in his attitude to women. Okonkwo displaces his anger which would have been directed against his father to the ‘woman’. Woman represents to Okonkwo a ‘non-man’, ‘a failed man’, ‘inability to be a man’. And to be a man, one should exhibit masculinity in its rawness; be in control and in charge of his home and wives; possess strength to work hard; be wealthy; acquire titles that distinguish him from feminine men and above all be able to kill for a cause if possible. Women in the society Okonkwo comes from do not have the above privileges, powers and positions. Because of this, any man who does not fit into his perception of a man, like his father is a failure. His father reminds him of poverty, depravity, hunger, shame, disgrace, weakness and worthlessness, which he suffered in childhood and struggled so hard to overcome. He battles any modicum of insinuation that he might be back to that state of being. Chinua Achebe contends that women stand for compassion, and that all the problems Okonkwo has from beginning to end are related to ignoring the female¹. Okonkwo does this by reacting to everyone he encounters as a mirror of his father, whom he considers a failure because of his feminine tendencies. He does not identify with femininity because in his unconscious he is involved in a battle against structures that made possible the depravity that characterized his childhood. Solomon Iyasere agrees that Okonkwo’s lack of personal balance is the consequence of his failure to balance the male and female constituents of personality. Iyasere also argues that in over reacting to his father’s fault, “Okonkwo denies himself the internal symmetry on which a person’s moral well-being must traditionally be based, a symmetry that is properly expressed in the attitude of the body and in the phrasing of physical movement” (108). He goes on to opine that he shuts out aesthetic pleasure because his father was a flutist, and opens the door to suffering, compelling his family members to work more than their strength can take them. He is a man dominated by the **Id** aspect of personality, which is characterized by impatience. Implications of action are unnecessary to the id. The fact that Okonkwo abhors idleness, is athletic, a war monger, and quite instinctive attest to the above fact. He is not a man of intellect. He is ruled by passion; the realm of the id.

In his relationship with other members of the society, it is apparent that Okonkwo displaces the actions that would have been directed against his father, by the manner he disparages, disapproves of, pounces on and even talks at people. These are some camouflage and diversionary activities to the ego, which are intended to hide the real target of his attacks. His intolerance of failure and contempt for lesser men are the consequences of his fear of failure and of weakness, should he be found to resemble his father. Okonkwo’s life is therefore ruled by a complex as he sees himself as incomplete and unfulfilled. This persistent feeling of insufficiency eventually results in inferiority complex, which alienates him further from his

people. Nevertheless, Alfred Adler considers the ‘feeling of insufficiency as ‘a positive pain’. He contends that “human beings are in permanent state of feeling their inferiority, which constantly spurs them unto further action in order to attain greater security” (98).

Unable to manage this condition effectively, Okonkwo’s problem graduates to the level of superiority complex. Adler also identifies the characteristics observable in an individual suffering from superiority complex to include “arrogance, exuberant emotion, snobbism, boastfulness, a tyrannical nature, inclination to domineer over people who are weak or ill or of diminutive stature, misuse of valuable ideas and tendency to depreciate other persons.” (122) A critical examination of Okonkwo’s character reveals that he possesses almost all the identified qualities of a victim of superiority complex. So, in all of his actions, he is only creating a defense mechanism that will serve as a mental cushion to prevent the stress resulting from the pressure from his unconscious. He protects himself through this mechanism. But all these attempts at protecting himself are battles against the fear of being like his father. As a result he fails to have a balanced personality, which leads to the regularity with which he plunges into one tragic error or the other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we align our position with Emeka Nwabueze’s view that the origin of the psychic pattern that portrays Okonkwo’s behaviour should be traced to the “paternal imago” (206). His resort to violence is a way of rejecting his father and whatever he represents. Most of the violent actions he takes including the killing of Ikemefuna are caused by this paternal imago. We are told that before this incident, he felt uncomfortable and would have avoided participating in it. But he is afraid of being called weak, for his “whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness” (TFA, 9).

Okonkwo’s chi may have said yes at the beginning of the narrative, but the same chi seems to abandon him at the climactic moment of his life. We contend that what happens to Okonkwo is not all about the gods and the religiosity of the Ibo, but mostly due to the psychological makeup of the individual involved. The driving forces behind most of his actions have logical explanations.

His eventual destruction may illuminate the ambiguous relationship between him and his personal god. But at the same time, his childhood contributes a great deal to his character

formation and to what his adulthood eventually becomes. He dies a completely flawed hero and not his people's hero. He ends tragically resulting from inherent behavioural traits driven by unseen forces, especially from his unconscious. These forces are apparent when he beats his wives; pounces on people; insults people for not being man enough, cuts off people's head as if he were cutting off a fowl's head; leads delegation on dangerous missions on behalf of his community; or defies warnings of gods and goddesses. It should be understandable that some unconscious factors are at play.

Those traits are mere devious methods through which his true targets of attack in his unconscious are hidden. Some repressed materials assert themselves and are displaced into acts of aggression and bravery. This is Okonkwo's lot. He lives in fear. He does not want to be called a woman, because that would always remind him of his father who was a failure. This fear drives him unconsciously to many acts of aggression and bravery, and eventually to his tragic demise. He dies and gets the same type of burial against which he battles with his whole life to prevent. He dies not mourned by the people he fights to protect. He dies a failed and a flawed hero. Anthonia Kalu avers that "having fully considered potential sources for the excoriation of the things within the society itself, the people devise a system to ensure that the Okonkwo though capable of achieving the conspicuous requirements for admission into the group of elders, would not be allowed to lead them toward self-destruction" (148-9). Okonkwo's suicide is not only senseless, but needless and a mark of irresponsibility as far as Umuofia is concerned.

Notes

1. Interview granted to The Voice on the eve of PEN American Center Celebration, Feb., 19 2008) by Carol Cooper

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*The syntactic characteristic of certain
legal texts is the inversion of the word
order which makes the arrangement
both striking and peculiar.*