Reading *Things Fall Apart*: The Communal World, the Embattled Zones of Conquest, and the Decline of Tradition

[Ode Ogede](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/advancedSearch.do?method=doSearch&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&userGroupName=txshracd2512&inputFieldNames%5b0%5d=AU&prodId=GLS&inputFieldValues%5b0%5d=%22Ode+Ogede%22" \o "" \t ")

Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. London: Continuum, 2007. p39-82. Rpt. in

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[(essay date 2007) *In the following essay, Ogede analyzes elements of allegory in* Things Fall Apart. *He argues that the “story about the male struggle for authority and respect as well as economic and political empowerment masks a more disturbing tale about a divided sense of self and how women achieve power and respect within a patriarchy.”*]

Of the many richly detailed fictionalized accounts of the texture of African communal life and of the onset of European imperial encroachment into it, ***Things Fall Apart***’s are the most sparkling and most complex. In this book, one of the classics of literary ethnography—indeed one of the novels that define what traditional Africa is—author Achebe’s sensitivity and thoroughness convey to readers a pre-colonial world of the Igbos of Nigeria, making scene after scene reveal spectacular information about the quotidian social life of two of their communities. ***Things Fall Apart*** creates a crystalline view of Igbo customs, including family life in the polygamous household, the patterns of falling in love and marriage, work and play in the public communal setting, and the placement of women in this patriarchal society. Even within its modest and compressed form, Achebe’s novel presents an astonishing wealth of materials and close attention to detail about the seasonal rhythm of the year and the intense interest the Igbos have in going about earning a living, making sense of their existence, governing themselves, and burying their dead, all of which the novel uses to reveal the complex particularities of their attitudes and values as a distinct cultural group. In this way, the account of the genesis of European missionary and military invasion of that world that accompanies the story falls naturally into place as an exploration of a powerful force that came to upset the many layers of harmony that an African people know and love.

Any text as popular and layered as ***Things Fall Apart*** is bound to be read and re-read in a number of different ways in the light of ever developing insights and perspectives.1 Thematically, approaches taken so far in readings of the novel fall into two distinct camps. There are, on the one hand, those who read the novel as the story of Okonkwo, a famous warrior and expert farmer who rises quickly from humble origins to become a wealthy and respected leader of his clan only to fall precipitously from those heights.2 In these readings, the novel is thought of as being about the deeds of an impressive individual. With an emphatic critical focus placed on the centrality of the super-sized image of Okonkwo and his human weaknesses and strengths, what emerges is a view of the world in which the individual is conceived as the primary agent of change in society, the controller of both his and society’s destiny.

Those who view the novel as essentially the story of a community, on the other hand, do acknowledge the fact that hero Okonkwo’s destiny intertwines with his people’s.3 Distinguishing their reading, however, is a belief that an interest in peoples’ lives quite apart from their community makes one liable to brush over the determinist laws of historical change which make us understand that human beings are largely what society makes them. At the heart of this method of reading is the image of people as both objects and subjects of change. Though people act and are acted upon in time and place by their surroundings, this view upholds, the burden of the force of history is ultimately corporately borne by communities. When carefully examined, it will be clear that each of these points of view is right in stressing those features of the text to which it gives attention, but both gain in magnitude and importance when they are considered together because neither is, strictly speaking, correct alone.

Both perceptions of the novel can work closely and collaboratively together for good reason: ***Things Fall Apart***’s density makes it nearly infinitely suggestive: it is meaningful on many levels. Framed by two interlocking plots, the Okonkwo family plot and his Umofia and Mbanta communities’ plot, the two worlds inevitably intersect with one another. Although it is written in the realistic mode, ***Things Fall Apart*** has symbolic resonances. Its multi-layered design enables it to perform the two main functions that Thomas H. Luxon has identified with allegories: the ability ‘to forge a figural view of reality while championing the “literal” and “historical.”’4 In the same context, Luxon finds in allegorical presentation a tendency for ‘text and reality’ to ‘exchange and re-exchange positions’ (1995: 29). Achebe is not included in that study, which is primarily concerned with the English Reformation, but the process Luxon observes is applicable to ***Things Fall Apart*** for while, on one hand, Achebe’s characters are clearly fictional creations, on the other, the material contents of his text (European colonialism and the Igbo response to it) are well-known factual events in African social history which are verifiable from both written records and the oral tradition.

To recognize ***Things Fall Apart*** as a political allegory in a pastoral mode is to discover that it is a novel as much about what happens in moral and spiritual terms as about the outcome of the political events it depicts. The text’s main focus centres on the threat to Igbo sovereignity and other aspects of the rural culture of the people. That pressure includes menace to Igbo religious traditions and ideas of good and evil as well. As a specific form of allegory, the exemplum, ***Things Fall Apart*** has a double function: to show an active illustration of traditional African culture in all its vibrancy and to highlight the fallout resulting from its destabilization by European imperial expansion.

Despite these modest objectives, ***Things Fall Apart*** confronts readers with a series of enigmas. Principally, its deceptive simplicity hides a complex thematic and stylistic texture. It begins with the simple story of tragic hero Okonkwo. But it uses Okonkwo’s career to show how the individual’s fate and the destiny of his community are collapsed into one another. As a result, Umofia and Mbanta, the representative Igbo communities highlighted, emerge not as mere backdrops for the exploration of Okonkwo’s personal dilemmas but as the definitive pictures of the unified order of the historical Igbo society in the period between 1890 and 1900 when the British presence began to establish itself in the region.

**Male Acts, Female Spectatorship: Dissolving Borders through the Democracy of Sports**

To properly understand this compressed novel, the reader should be very attentive to the subtextual issues raised right from the very opening scene of the famous extraordinary wrestling match, in which the underdog fighter Okonkwo makes history by overthrowing the reigning champion of his region. In that important textual moment, an encounter of epic proportions takes place. It’s certainly not a mere coincidence that Achebe opens and closes his novel with combat. It is the unifying thread in the novel. The momentous, fierce wrestling contest at the beginning, with different twists of plots, in which society is caught up in a frenzy of anticipation that quickly terminates with the sudden breathtaking victory of the courageous rising star, is indicative of the uncommon promise with which Okonkwo begins his career and the energy of the community which it is his good fortune to have behind him, though he ends up disappointingly not being able to take adequate advantage of it. The bloodier, more violent conflict that wraps up the story, in which a life is taken leading to the annihilation of the cultural hero himself by the very hands with which he secured the reputed wrestling victory at his first battle in the novel’s opening scene, suggests a round defeat, the grave disappointment of the monumental initial promise of Okonkwo’s career and the agony of his community that had its bubbling expectations deflated within the twinkle of an eye and can only helplessly watch the ecstatic victorious British colonial order making away with the real trophy.

What these key opening and closing textual moments show is that fighting is central to ***Things Fall Apart***’s plan to capture a world exhaustively detailed with events which make up an Igbo people’s mundane grind of daily existence and seasonal cycle of occurrences. Fighting also carries a huge symbolic significance that is integral to the novel’s overall structure; after all, it is the enabling event that permits hero Okonkwo to stand out among his peers at the beginning, and it is also the decisive force that brings him down in the end. Donatus Nwoga (1964) recognized quite early the importance of Okonkwo’s struggle with his *chi,* his guardian angel or fate. Ironically, the component of Okonkwo’s struggle that has even more to say about ***Things Fall Apart***’s organizing principle of structure, the part to do with the function assigned to fighting, is the part readers have not yet commented upon, though it is even more important.

Achebe opens his novel with a fight in part to provide readers with a graphic image of the impending cultural struggle in the realm of the word, a linguistic tussle between English as the language of authority and the subject Igbo language. There are few things worse than a confrontation of unequally matched forces; for the indigenous African languages the collision with European languages is something of a lost cause from the start. According to Loreto Todd, when European and African languages came into contact with each other, jostling for supremacy caused ‘the relexification’ of the ‘mother tongue’ of Africans, whose writers were then forced to use ‘English vocabulary but indigeneous structures and rhythms’ (1982: 303). It is a fate Chantal Zabus calls one of ‘domination’ of African languages by European languages (1991: 104). Presented in Igbo-inflected English, ***Things Fall Apart*** can be seen as an instance of this process of linguistic hybridization, in which victory for English obviously translates into a corresponding marginalization for Igbo.

***Things Fall Apart*** opens with a furious fight also as a ploy to provide an anchor for a major formula: to make tangible the subject of the impending violent military attack by European forces and of Okonkwo’s signifying leadership role in the response by the anti-colonial forces of liberation. In this way, not only does the narrative foreshadow two of the novel’s predominant themes, but it also quite appropriately begins by portraying Okonkwo as a figure of historical transition, a superman who is physically an imposing symbol of strength, though we soon realize that he is crumbling from within; the edifice of a declining old order confronting the emergent colonial hegemonic one:5

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old man agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven nights.

The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat.6

As readers often agree, individual accomplishment is the cornerstone of the Igbo social life depicted in the novel. In the intensely patriarchal culture of the Igbos, no man wants to be invisible; every man wants recognition. This is the force that impels each man to strive for something to make him break out of the lot, to rise above the rank and file.7 When Okonkwo executes the finishing wrestling manoeuvre and puts to rout his legendary opponent, he activates that principle and communicates the certain urgency he feels to outperform everyone. At least from the outside looking in, he looks strong. And it is apparent that, since the same drive has made the seven villages of the Umofia clan to be so ‘powerful in war and in magic’ that its ‘priests and medicine-men’ are ‘feared’ in the region (8), the narrative is distinctly touting the men as those exclusively invested with agency. Right from the foundational episode, this novel appears to deny any form of instrumentality to the female gender.

Yet a closer attention reveals that things are more complex than they at first appear. In fact, the women are not to be dismissed as mere spectators or idle bystanders since they take an active interest in gearing up the men as they flex their muscles. It would be wrong to equate male performance with power, and female spectatorship with passiveness. Contrary to what some critics maintain, we cannot definitively and restrictively associate men with the centre and women with the margins in this novel. Even the events pitching Okonkwo against Amalinze the Cat indicate that the epic battle is as much the concern of the spectators, who are mostly women and children, as it is that of the two male contestants.8 And, since Okonkwo is not as strong as he looks from the outside, the essence of manhood may not be what it is perceived to be either, if he is considered to define it.

There are hardly any sporting events where audiences do not have major impacts on the outcomes of the contest, usually through their applause or boos and jeers. It is no surprise that the traditional Igbo wrestling event is no different. Primarily because the viewing publics have a visibly intimidating affective presence, the battle for victory here, as in any other sporting event, is as much the story of spectator involvement as it is that of the personal efforts of the men who are embroiled in the contest of wills. This audience participation is registered by the way the uncertainty of the contest’s outcome is presented as though it were as much a cause of anxiety for the men locking horns as it is for the deeply engaged viewers of the progress of the fight. The result of the fight is the drawing board of the event. Thus, there are no indifferent bystanders. No wonder, when Okonkwo outfoxes the fox himself and secures eventual victory, it is received as much as a notch on his belt as it is a triumph for his supporters who have set great store by it. Wrestling fans, one of the most ardent of whom is evidently Okonkwo’s own wife Ekwefi, make such a huge emotional investment in the fight it can be said that victory is secured from the very palpable energy of the crowd. That is why there are hardly any audience members who are indifferent about the result of the fight.

Because the great admiration for Okonkwo which the Umofia society expresses at the opening of the novel is tied to his heroic fighting trophy, it is inconceivable that without the wrestling event he would build the impressive career credited to him. It is a fait accompli that the Igbo wrestling audience is an audience acutely aware of its own relevance, an audience with a consciousness of its own significance, of the power of its fervour. By occasioning his meteoric rise to fame and eminence, Okonkwo’s wrestling accolade inserts itself into the heart of the novel’s design, not only in structural and stylistic terms, in the way great novels often utilize finely etched opening scenes to keep the reader in suspense, but also in terms of summing up their subject matter to relax the tension.

Thematically, Okonkwo’s dauntless victory against Amalinze the Cat and the cheers it has drawn stand apart as a testament of successful communal endeavour, casting all his other efforts into doubt and relative insignificance. Here is the only event where the ill-fated protagonist achieves total victory, an achievement that brings both himself and all his community a totalizing sense of fulfilment and is widely celebrated as such. The realization of a democratic ideal, a concept dear to the Igbos, Okonkwo’s gallant wrestling feat is a grand illustration of the belief that by taking the apparent failure of one’s family as a spur to boost one’s drive to want more of life, one can overturn what the family did to bring one down and cripple one’s soul by doing the opposite of what is expected of someone from one’s family. It thus stands here for a man’s ability to overcome any event that challenges his mettle and pushes him beyond both his physical and mental limitations.

It is therefore an event with resonant structural and thematic implications for the meaning of the narrative, offering the lesson that just as mere brute force is not the primary arsenal employed in defeating Amalinze the Cat, combating British imperial designs effectively will require more than brute force; it will need the kind of deft tactics employed by Okonkwo in securing a win. Through the transformation it undergoes in the hands of the novelist, the valiant wrestling competition moves from being just a game of personal rivalry into a communal contest of wills. The wrestling contest offers a uniquely appropriate metaphor for understanding the colonization/decolonization antithesis, because its import is not lost on the audience; the Igbos are a competitive people so they are no strangers to contention against obstacles. Since they lived in a setting where accolades lingered long in the cultural memory of society, the wrestling event and the victory it confers carried a greater gravitas of effect in their society than it would in the information overload culture of today, where successive floods of events seem to overwhelm society with uncanny rapidity and vanish out of the communal memory just as quickly as they occur.

What is evident, then, it is important to pause to notice, is the subtle way in which the novel puts a symbolical political spin on the dialectic of the sporting event, for with a single stroke it delineates the type of dexterity the Igbos will need to defeat European occupation forces. Of course, by the end of this novel, as in the true history it represents, the plan to mount a triumphant native resistance to colonization turns out to be a pipe dream, since it happens that Okonkwo’s slaying of the court messenger doesn’t galvanize his people’s united action to resist the occupation forces as he had hoped. He ends up hanging himself. The community that celebrated his victory at the wrestling encounter is now left even without the voice to mourn. ‘That man was one of the greatest men in Umofia,’ the community’s spokesman, Obierika, quietly and ruefully tells the District Commissioner. ‘You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog …’ (147).

The focus of Obierika’s moving private remarks expresses his clear vision of the importance of audience participation, of communal involvement with the individual’s experience. The main focus of his grief is that at his best friend’s death his community cannot even do his body its last duty. Tradition forbids the Umofia and Mbanta people to touch the body of a suicide. And so, Obierika asks the white District Commissioner to take it. The tragic isolation of the community leader’s final moments is summed up by the figures of the villagers walking away from his dangling body and the image of the District Commissioner himself walking back to the court with his thoughts focused not on planning a funeral that would be befitting of the stature of the deceased but on the trivial matter of writing a book of memoirs in which ‘the story of a man who killed a messenger and then hanged himself’ might take up ‘perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate’ (147-8).

Without anyone ready to receive his body, Okonkwo becomes an abandoned man. The District Commissioner appears to make a comedy of the eventual defeat this means for Okonkwo. But for the community, Okonkwo’s demise is no laughing matter at all; rather, it is a matter with implications that lie beyond his personal elimination: a communal disaster for Igboland in material terms because nothing in Umofia’s history before this event compares with the collective sense of horror that has been unleashed by the disaster. It signals the complete end of the old order in Igboland as a whole. Indeed, the monumental scope of the crisis that the event of Okonkwo’s death has fomented is marked for the reader by the terrifying appearances which it has summoned to life, an acme of confusion and disorder:

That night the Mother of the Spirits walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for her murdered son. It was a terrible night. Not even the oldest man in Umofia had ever heard such a strange and fearful sound, and it was never to be heard again. It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming—its own death.

On the next day all the masked *egwugwu* of Umofia assembled in the market-place. They came from all the quarters of the clan and even from the neighbouring villages. The dreaded Otakagu came from Imo, and Ekwensu, dangling a white cork, arrived from Uli. It was a terrible gathering. The eerie voices of countless spirits, the bells that clattered behind some of them, and the clash of matchets as they ran forwards and backwards and saluted one another, sent tremors of fear into every heart. For the first time in living memory the sacred bull-roarer was heard in broad daylight.(132)

The pressures that society now feels and senses are so new and so threatening that it cannot yet name them. Just as he did in life, in his death Okonkwo has acted in ways that have called forth a big story. Yet, big as the story of his wrestling victory undeniably is, being the one event that established his initial designation as warrior and ultimate fighting machine, the story of Okonkwo’s death has even more far-reaching impact in at least one respect: unlike the glory of his wrestling prize—uproarious as it is—his death is no ordinary event. In fact, in a reversal of his open victory that is a major subject of public celebration at the novel’s opening scene, Okonkwo’s death signals that instead of his being in command of the situation, someone else is; instead of being surrounded by admiring, cheering audiences or grieving relatives, Okonkwo is a man publicly unmourned; a man who has left his community to stand silent and separated. This is the sense in which his defeat fits neatly into the combat pattern of the novel’s narrative frame, serving as it does as a closure to a major chapter of Igbo history. Okonkwo may have had the first word on victory, but it is the British who have the last.9

**Agriculture, Rank, and the Cult of Recognition: Social Climbing and the Futility of the Quest**

Even if only for the fascinating story it tells about a strong male desire among the Igbos—a near-chivalric type ambition embodied in a frantic search for social capital—Okonkwo’s desperate struggle to earn seed yams, the first major battle he has to overcome after posting victory at the famous wrestling combat, repays detailed attention. It is also epochal in another respect: it bears much resemblance to Europe’s empire-building quests and is thus a feature that adds to the artistic integrity of the novel, for it demonstrates clearly that just as Britain rose to power by plundering the mineral wealth of Africa, the spices of Asia, and the trades of the Middle East, Okonkwo has to count on authority to rub off on him not by marrying an emperor’s daughter as we have it in chivalric romances but by connecting with someone who has ‘three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children’ and has taken ‘the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan’ (13-14).

Okonkwo, having convinced himself that he started life with the disadvantage of not getting the inheritance of ‘a barn’ or a young wife from his father, therefore makes a last-ditch decision to visit a wealthy man in his village to borrow seed yams with which he hopes to achieve that much-needed break. In practical terms, however, just as expanding territorial domains and authority never comes about without pain (expansionist imperial Britain had to fight battles with unpredictable climates and dangerous terrains), so rising to wealth and local power will not be handed to Okonkwo on a golden platter. Okonkwo has tougher battles ahead, since getting paramount citizenship would require him to be first reduced to a *persona non grata.* Okonkwo must first pay his dues by submitting himself for the honour set before him; he has to lay down his pride to take it up again in greater measure. He must first forfeit the very dignity eminence will confer and show a willingness to endure short-term discomforts for the gratification that lies ahead.

The somewhat paradoxical idea reflected in Okonkwo’s career is that the road to public honour is paved with insults of a private kind. The image of Okonkwo going down on his knees before Nwakibie tells it all—a man abasing himself before another man:

He took a pot of palm-wine and a cock to Nwakibie. Two elderly neighbours were sent for, and Nwakibie’s two grown-up sons were also present in his *obi.* He presented a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which was passed round for all to see and then returned to him …

After the kola nut had been eaten Okonkwo brought his palm-wine from the corner of the hut where it had been placed and stood it in the centre of the group. He addressed Nwakibie, calling him ‘our father.’

‘*Nna ayi,*’ he said. ‘I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you my respects and also to ask for a favour. But let us drink the wine first.’(14)

The testimony offered by such clues as the deferential acts of presenting Nwakibie with ‘a pot of palm-wine and a cock,’ ‘a kola nut and an alligator pepper,’ and of adopting the appropriate mode of address for a dignitary of his calibre by calling Nwakibie ‘our father’ is significant. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Okonkwo’s obeisant outlook is not all that different from the comely way in which Nwakibie’s own wives present themselves before his awe-inspiring presence. Unlike the way in which the women in the traditional Igbo polygamous household typically carry themselves with a certain stately bearing, Nwakibie’s wives exhibit behaviour more in keeping with that of a harem in a non-egalitarian set-up. Thus, after the usual exchange of niceties and pleasantries, when the palm-wine is shared among the men present, Nwakibie calls in his wives and they enter in their order of seniority, get down on one knee, drink, and then walk away.

There must be something going on inside Okonkwo that makes him show a similar servile complaisance, for when the business resumes, this is how he pronounces his mission:

‘I have come for your help,’ he said. ‘Perhaps you can already guess what it is. I have cleared a farm but have no yams to sow. I know what it is to ask a man to trust another with his yams, especially these days when young men are afraid of hard work. I am not afraid of work. The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. I began to fend for myself when most people still suck at their mothers’ breasts. If you give me some yam seeds I shall not fail you.’(15-16)

In contrast to Okonkwo’s self-effacing presentation, Nwakibie exults in being feted because it is the appropriate behaviour for social dignitaries in his community that observes a rarefied sense of rank. Thus, he boasts heartily to the gathering that he has turned down many similar requests from other young men because he knows ‘they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds’ (16). Justifying his action as not arising out of heartlessness but out of adaptation to experience, he says he has learnt from Eneke the bird who ‘says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching’ (16). So Nwakibie tells Okonkwo that he has learnt ‘to be stingy’ with his yams. ‘But I can trust you. I know it as I look at you. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go ahead and prepare your farm.’ (16)

As testified by the power of the proverbs used by both of these speakers to clarify their positions during that sensitive and tactful conversation, the burden of interest is upon the manner in which Okonkwo has conducted himself so far as a supplicant presenting a delicate and heavy request before an authority figure. The matter of the award of credit is a weighty one, and so composure is everything, for it is the manner of Okonkwo’s disposition that will make the difference between having his petition heard or rejected like those of the other young men who tried before him. Though simmering with haughtiness, Okonkwo therefore comes to Nwakibie cloaked in the garb of humility. Thanks to the power of one’s bearing to lubricate human relations among the Igbos, Nwakibie gives up his seed yams because of the apparent humility of Okonkwo’s demeanour (‘I know it as I look at you’).

The bitter irony of this whole episode in Okonkwo’s life is that the damage has already been done both to his mental frame and to his emotional poise. The ethical tone of Nwakibie’s speech suggests that he censures many young men who ‘come to ask for yams’ because he considers appearance to be a decided index of character, and rituals of power as unspoken, hidden public transcripts require poor people to acknowledge their lowly status with politeness. When Okonkwo accepts this hierarchy—Nwakibie’s open display of domination—therefore, he earns the rich man’s assistance. Thus ‘Okonkwo thanked him again and again and went home feeling happy. He knew that Nwakibie would not refuse him, but he had not expected he would be so generous’ (16).

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance,* James C. Scott observes that ‘members of the dominant groups … learn the knack of acting with authority and self-assurance from socialization. For hereditary ruling groups the training has typically begun at birth; the aristocrat learns how to act like an aristocrat, the Brahim like a Brahim, the man like a man. For those whose position is not inherited, on-the-job training is required to make them convincing in their roles as bosses, professors, military officers, colonial officials’ (1992: 49). As a result, Scott adds that, to survive, poor people have to learn to act appropriate conduct by employing devices of concealment, to hide their true feelings in their relations with the powerful.

It is not surprising that Okonkwo’s joy is short-lived. It turns out that his visit to Nwakibie is a clear instance of the sort of discomfiting situation described by Scott, one in which a poor person is compelled by circumstances beyond his control to seek out the rich and powerful. That is why, in consonance with the kinds of circumspect behaviour expected in such settings, Okonkwo has no choice but to humble himself. Borrowing seed yams from Nwakibie finally brings him face to face with the situation he has dreaded and tried hard to avoid all along: becoming a debtor like his own father, Unoka.

The borrowing of seed yams is one of those ambivalent acts which on one level leverages Okonkwo’s material base, yet on another level questions, and even undermines, his confidence. Somewhat subliminally, whether or not Okonkwo himself is aware of it, becoming a debtor serves as a physical reinforcement of the mental violations he has already suffered through his acceptance of the sense of the inferiority of his patrimony. The manner of getting the seed yams eventuates a significant psychological slide for Okonkwo. A victim of economic assault, he is first a victim of psychological abuse, a brutalization which the process of earning the seed yams only incenses.

A mentally self-undermining act, a deed with a strategy of persuasion that falls short of achieving the desired result of building Okonkwo up, that visit contains a stirring critique of the motive force of its own success because the results that it brings are mixed: though successful in getting Okonkwo the seed yams, the visit comes with a heavy price, not just producing the opposite result of what was intended by lowering his confidence even further, but also causing him to lose perhaps the last shred of the most precious asset he could possibly have as a man, especially at that formative stage of his life: his relationship with his own father, the very foundation on which a man’s sense of security is based.

Had it not transformed Okonkwo into a snob, intensifying his disregard of his own father, Okonkwo’s association with Nwakibie would not have been as damaging as it turns out to be. Because a young man needs a father to validate him, Okonkwo’s holding his father in low regard ultimately takes away from him that key pillar of parental love and security, the ingedients of inner peace and wholesomeness known as self-dignity.

James Scott rightly argues a few pages further on in the same book that dignity is ‘at once a very private and a very public attribute’ (1992: 113). One can therefore become diminished, or as Scott puts it nicely in the same context, ‘[one] can experience indignity at the hands of another despite the fact that no one else sees or hears about it. What is reasonably clear, however, is that any indignity is compounded greatly when it is inflicted in public’ (113). This explanation is not inapposite for understanding the far-reaching negative psychological effects that Okonkwo’s consort with Nwakibie causes him, especially in light of Scott’s remark that ‘[an] insult, a look of contempt, a physical humiliation, an assault on one’s character and standing, a rudeness is nearly always far more injurious when it is inflicted before an audience’ (113).

Given Okonkwo’s impressionable personality, it makes sense that his presentation before Nwakibie should fatally weaken, if not entirely eliminate, what little patrimonial regard he has left. Having to literally grovel before Nwakibie, who is surrounded by his admiring wives and the august company to which he belongs, could only have a most humbling effect on Okonkwo. Undoubtedly, the contribution of the occasion to his heightening sense of the low opinion he already has of himself cannot be overemphasized. First sparked by his believing how the public views his father, especially swallowing the opinion of his own peers wholesale, Okonkwo’s sagging sense of self is brought to its climax as he sits in a stunned state at Nwakibie’s feet.

Ostentation is a sign of the snob, and so all of Okonkwo’s subsequent outlandish pursuit of success, which he narrowly defines to equate with material prosperity and aggression, can be seen as motivated by a desperate desire to redeem the self-inflicted insult of consorting with a superior who did not prove as nurturing as hoped. The feeling of being lesser than another person is not conducive to a sense of security; the love of oneself casts out fear; anything which lessens one’s sense of self causes inner dissonance, which is why in Okonkwo’s case,

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, the fear of the forest, and the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo’s fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father’s failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was *agbala.* That was how Okonkwo came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness.(9-10)

Perhaps if he could avoid being paranoid, Okonkwo would understand that in his society ‘a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father’ (6). In any case, he might also form an independent opinion of his own father regarding other attributes like compassion, taste, integrity, friendliness, intelligence and creativeness. Perhaps if Okonkwo was not so blinded by his own narrow personal agenda, he might notice that he has a good father. Unoka possesses several sterling qualities. Surprisingly, Okonkwo gives little thought to the encouragement his father offers him during the ‘terrible harvest month’ that followed the year he borrowed the seed yams from Nwakibie. ‘Do not despair,’ Unoka tells his son, at that moment of great depression. ‘I know you will not despair. You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone’ (18). Far from being the bumbling idiot Okonkwo makes him out to be, Unoka’s words suggest that he is rather more of a sage who is as eager as he is determined to build up his son. A paradox in Okonkwo’s behaviour is that his overcompensating masculinity, which is really his manner of covering up a low self-esteem, causes him to despise his own father, a man whose image he cannot bear and wants to eradicate as if it were a deadly virus.

As well as being a coward, and a tender-hearted person who could not hurt a fly, Unoka took no titles and was saddled with a heavy burden of debt and harassed incessantly by creditors. But he was not stupid. Rather, he was a highly learned man, who received a lesson or two from the field in which he was better than anyone, his musical career, which he could have passed on in his family—especially to Okonkwo. Okonkwo misjudges his own father because of his misplaced ambitions that triggered the paranoid fear of being in danger of inheriting a bad image. Fear is the emotion that causes him to lose the sense of balance of things, which not only has the undermining effect of depriving him of personal inner peace but also causes the ever-escalating tensions in his relationships with others. While youthful exuberance draws Okonkwo into trouble, the material for temperate judgement already exists within his reach were he to look to the lessons of his own wrestling success, which is grounded in the value of negotiating delicate situations with extreme adroitness and graceful resolve and of learning to avoid the easy routes of abrasion and to take the more complex ones.

Nowhere is the scenario better played out than in the case of Unoka: that a discrepancy could exist between how a person looks or what people think of him, on the one hand, and who he really is on the other. It is particularly the case in a rural setting, such as Unoka’s, which is perennially rife with circulating misconceived ideas about neighbours, that the image people have of one another can be based on suspect theorizing, a combination of truths and half-truths: conjectures, speculations, rumours, slander and gossip. It is quite natural that characterizations of Unoka have been in line with these sorts of practice. Culled from a mixture of truths, half-truths and plain exaggerations accepted and circulated by a public that has not bothered to make any effort to get to the bottom of things by way of painstaking in-depth analysis, opinions about Unoka beg to be taken with a grain of salt:

In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man’s mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one’s lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbour some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts.

He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking or playing on his flute. He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moments were the two or three moons after the harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the fireplace. Unoka would play with them, his face beaming with blessedness and peace.(3-4)

It is through the contrasting personalities of Okonkwo and his father Unoka that Achebe gets the chance to explore the gap between appearance and reality. People generally think of Unoka as lazy and improvident, but the absence of definitive attribution in the statements in circulation about him reflects the lack of truth-value assigned to each one of those claims by the narrative, claims that derive more from the common lore of hearsay than from verifiable evidence: that he is ‘quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow’; ‘He always said that whenever he saw a dead man’s mouth he saw the folly’; ‘He wore a haggard and mournful look except when he was drinking.’

On the contrary, the real truth is that Unoka is financially insecure, but this is not because he lacks either talent or the drive to enlarge his estate. Rather, it is indicated that Unoka could not make a decent living from his craft because he lives and works as a musician in a setting where the musical profession has not gained commercial value. Though he is suspected of having such an inclination, far from being lazy, Unoka is a very hard-working man. A musical celebrity who is the life of the party in his community, Unoka has brought more joy to many than anyone and has made a huge investment in the entertainment industry in his society. This is the reason that he is portrayed in an essentially positive light by the narrative.10 It is not without good reason that Unoka’s musical skills were in high demand around neighbouring villages, where he took great delight and effort in mentoring fledgling musicians and dancers: ‘Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship (4).

One may question whether it is Unoka’s choice to belong to ‘that class of artists who believe that they should live for their work and not prostitute the integrity of their art to sterile materialism’ (Palmer, 1972: 56). There is simply not enough evidence to show that Unoka is a rebel in revolt against the trappings of material wealth; what we are shown, however, is that he has the reputation his musical talent conferred on him but lacks financial substance or political authority in his society because the profession of the artist has not yet gained commercial viability. In any event, it does not make any sense to expect someone as mired in debt as Unoka is to disapprove of additional income.

One reason for being misjudged and suspected of having inclinations to be lazy is that Unoka is the kind of person who is as happy as a lark. Perfectly in tune with nature, Unoka makes merry when the weather is good, for example, when old men and children would ‘sit round log fires, warming bodies,’ he ‘loved it all, and he loved the first kites that returned with the dry season, and the children who sang songs of welcome to them. He would remember his own childhood, how he had often wandered around looking for a kite sailing leisurely against the blue sky. As soon as he found one he would sing with his whole being, welcoming it back from its long, long journey, and asking it if it had brought home any lengths of cloth’ (4). Some people think his relaxed mood a form of laziness. But that isn’t quite correct. Unoka simply has a laid-back personality. His attitude of not taking life too seriously (he keeps looking for amusement) and his leisurely lifestyle are functional in that they give his community the drama of fun, humour, and love and pleasure, a touch of light-heartedness it badly lacks. As happens to Okonkwo, if anyone gets dismissive of Unoka’s good nature, the knack of frivolity he embodies, such an individual does so at his or her own peril.

A figure of fun, Unoka is undeniably one of ***Things Fall Apart***’s most influential characters, about whom readers have only a limited knowledge even though he is central to the plot’s overall structure. After all, it is he who helps Achebe to sound forth the theme of the tranquility of Igbo tribal life, of the motif of primordial innocence, of the period when Igbos had a oneness not only with themselves but also with nature and lived a stress-free life. Considering that Unoka is an essentially agreeable man, it is as though the unspoken or implied idea suggested by his not getting along easily with his own son Okonkwo is that there is a hidden problem somewhere.11 Readers of the novel come face to face with one reality: in the social embarrassment or humiliation and shame that Okonkwo feels over his sense that his father is worthless, in Okonkwo’s snobbery and overweening self-regard and his frantic search to repair this apparently irremediable status he believes he has inherited, one enters into the world of a hypertensive megalomaniac, a world in which the dichotomy between the society’s success code and the sense an overambitious but wounded hero has of it looms large, a world that does not lack the touch of the theatrical.

During his confinement within this shabby world, becoming a successful farmer, becoming the holder of multiple titles and owner of a big household filled with multiple wives—none of these things can bring Okonkwo any more lasting satisfaction than the public applause of his larger-than-life wrestling performance when he won a monumental victory over Amalinze the Cat did, given the voraciousness of his ambitions. Depicting him as a man in bondage to an idea of unattainable success, a man doing hard time for the disturbed conditions of elemental discontent and of being lost and not knowing who he is, the narrative shows clearly why, with his vision of achievement set so firmly on a narrow conception of his society’s parameters of accomplishment, so many things are bound to go badly wrong in Okonkwo’s relationships and judgements; for despite the absence of bars and shackles, Okonkwo has found himself in a virtual prison, doing time behind the walls of his own consciousness, trapped behind the walls of self-imprisonment to a misplaced idea of ultimate self-fulfilment.

In his lucid analysis of the novel, critic Chidi Okonkwo refers readers to the fact that the protagonist ‘lives by a warped code of exaggerated masculinity dictated by his own neurotic personality, a perversion of cultural ideals in the past and a dangerous anachronism in the present’ (1999: 120).12 Hero Okonkwo’s behaviour leaves no doubt about the stiff opposition his singular perspective poses to ‘Umofia’s success ethic [that] is predicated upon a complementarity of masculine and feminine values (the so-called male and female principles)’ (120). These dualities of which Okonkwo remains tragically oblivious are embodied, the critic adds,

in the elaborate ritual balancing of the three cosmic planes of female Earth, male Sky and the spiritual doman; patrilineal, warlike Umofia’s dependence on a female deity (Ani or Earth, the earth godess) as its principal deity and this deity’s emanation (Agadi Nwayi or Old Woman) as source of its military prowess; the assignment of priestesses to male deities and priests to female deities; the designation of the powerful male oracle, served by the priestess Chielo, by the name Agbala which is also a designation for women and effeminate men; and the practice of burying a married woman among her own rather than her husband’s kindred. In the tale of the quarrel between Earth and Sky, harmony is restored only when Earth’s emissary softens Sky’s heart with a song (p. 38). Such songs represent the ‘poetry’ of life which Achebe symbolically associates with the female principle, and Okonkwo’s repudiation of this principle marks him out as a doomed man right from the beginning of the novel.(Okonkwo, 1999: 120)

The Igbos have a complex rather than a one-dimensional view of the world. But hero Okonkwo doesn’t see life in its intrinsic constitutive dualities, in its binary oppositions that require a delicate balancing act of negotiation. He misjudges things to the extent that his militant and inflexible search for respectability, a vision of which he had seen when he threw Amalinze the Cat in the celebrated wrestling match, his conception of crowning success as ‘exaggerated masculinity,’ finally crowds out the viability of other codes of values like compassion, affection, love, gentleness, cooperation, humility, tenderness, generosity, patience, tolerance, amiability, play and fun, moderation and sensitivity. This places him on a collision course with the vital life-sustaining beliefs and practices of his society. In this state, displays of emotion of every kind—except when they involve excessive manliness, rigidity, brute force, vanity, intolerance and brash treatment of those apparently less successful than himself—are shown to be either unappealing or inaccessible to him.

Though the society of the Igbos has enough flexibility to allow room for individuals like Unoka, therefore, Okonkwo’s inability to overcome the overwhelming pressure to attain his tapering vision of honour predisposes him to a narrow definition of accomplishment that makes it impossible for him to have a different regard for his father. It is impossible to follow the story of Okonkwo’s intense struggle for status without coming face to face with an ironic tangle: the more heated the search for social standing gets, the more the idea of status becomes a desperate way of covering up its real motivation. That impulse is the emptiness within his inner being that is precipitated by the insult of his father’s figure. It is the main force driving Okonkwo to be everything his father was not. As a consequence, he develops an unruly passion, the egotism of going one better than everyone else, and of despising everything his father represents. He becomes a desperate man fighting for pride, a man with a lot to prove.

The matter of Okonkwo’s bad social skills, of his inability to work in harmony with others, is one subject which recurs regularly in discussions of ***Things Fall Apart***, and it offers quite a surprising perspective on how it is that someone who has such a proven track record in the public display of valour could fail so woefully in human relations, a terrain not customarily considered to be as difficult to negotiate. Life on the domestic sphere for workaholic Okonkwo is a near-complete disaster. Okonkwo’s dramatic domestic life, for example, might have been comic were it not for the serious consequences it has. But at stake is the matter of the unhealthy addictions that frustrate an aspiring noble man’s efforts to provide a nurturing environment for his wives and an upbringing appropriate to well-adjusted young men and women; the exchange of honour, civility, and delicacy that would add balance to their lives, a path beyond the vulgarity of materialism.

**Women’s Territorial Dominance: The Domestic Spheres, Affection, Community, Festivity, Sharing, Love and Ritual**

When we closely examine his portrait of women, we see that not even Achebe’s talents have immunized him from being subjected to the usual charge that African male writers generally have a predilection for stereotypical depiction of female characters. Yet, in terms of their composite image, one could not hope for a more finely honed realistic portrait of women and womanhood than the one Achebe has put together in ***Things Fall Apart***.13 Unlike some of the images of rancour and divisiveness commonly associated with the women in the African polygamous household, Okonkwo’s wives, for example, are far from a bickering, quarrelsome or self-centered lot. Not only do they act in ways that support the idea that a successful man’s wives should participate in establishing and maintaining his social status through self-display, but forming a cohesive community of their own devoid of any form of cut-throat competitiveness, Okonkwo’s wives also collectively represent a uniquely original picture of women in a traditional polygamous household whose charming personalities contrastively help to unveil the demons in their husband that threaten to tear apart an otherwise great community. But the women are in no way over-idealized, since they are painted in all their essential humanity, in a way that highlights both their weaknesses and strengths, an accomplishment in representation achieved by an accumulation of tightly connected ironies.

For instance, all three wives—Ekwefi, Ojiugo and Nwoye’s mother—walk in obedience, taking orders from their husband. They are all eagerly waiting women, who serve his interests by regularly cooking and serving his meals on time, cleaning the compound, and doing all the domestic chores. In addition to providing these kinds of comfort at home, Okonkwo’s wives all take active roles in the education and upbringing of their children, and, when required, in ritual. They are thus equal participants with their husband in the transmission of culture to ensure the survival of the race. They also lend him a helping hand on the farm, refraining from nagging or complaining unnecessarily about things, and appearing to derive personal pleasure and satisfaction from these functions.

In light of the sense of peace and tranquillity that fills Okonkwo’s household whenever he is not around to disrupt the current with his tantrums, his wives seem the perfect co-wives. Collectively and individually, the wives habitually display unflagging loyalty and dedication. Not even the long-suffering Ekwefi, mother of an only surviving child, Ezinma, who has a reason not to identify with his dreams, does so. Even after losing one child after another, and after being nearly shot to death herself by her own husband, Ekwefi still does not turn bitter. Instead, she develops an unusual love for wrestling, his athletic passion, and her support does not waver one bit. If anything, Ekwefi’s interest rises to the status of a passion, from when as a young woman she ‘ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo’ to thirty years later, when she becomes ‘a woman of forty-five who had suffered a great deal in her time’ (28). It is indeed remarkable that the only intimate bedroom scene recorded involves Okonkwo’s memories of his first sexual encounter with Ekwefi, which occurred the night she ran away from her previous husband to knock on his door. ‘Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth’ (76).

Collectively, Okonkwo’s three wives are so respectful of the gender order, they do nothing to derail it, and their commitment to helping him sustain his public image seldom falters. They are rather extravagant in their support of him when he is entrusted by his village with Ikemefuna, the child hostage given to Umofia in compensation for the murder of a woman from Umofia by the neighbouring village of Mbaino. With a stunning graciousness, the women take the lad under their wings without raising a finger. Even when there is good reason to question his judgement, as happens when he beats second wife Ojiugo for serving him a late meal, the wives’ interest in helping Okonkwo to protect his public image always prevails. They not only do what is expected of them with enthusiasm and zest, but often they go beyond the call of duty in offering their love. In none of the major events where women are called upon to extend themselves do we find any of Okonkwo’s wives wanting in the display of goodwill, integrity and dedication.

It is no surprise that the events exhibiting the most profoundly sustained expressions of tenderness, love, devotion and altruism in the traditional African polygamous household all involve women’s communal work, be it cooking or painting, the application of the decorative arts, or dancing, all of which are areas where women exercise a clear dominance in the traditional Igbo culture. The extent to which this society depends on its womenfolk, especially in carrying out its ritual duties or organizing festivals, is therefore huge, and in this context three events particularly stand out: the occasion where the Umofia village is preparing for the New Yam Festival; the *uri,* otherwise known as the bride-offering ceremony (where Obierika’s daughter Akueke is being given in marriage to Ibe, her suitor); and the scene of Okonkwo’s farewell party for his Mbanta kinsmen.

We may begin with the New Yam Festival, a sort of thanksgiving ceremony in honour of *Ani,* ‘the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan’ responsible for fertility (26). Held ‘every year before the harvest began,’ it is on this occasion that the yam is publicly recognized as the community’s most important food crop, one standing for ‘manliness’ since ‘he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed’ (23). Naturally, during this ceremony a mood of festivity like no other graces the entire villages of Umofia, because nothing brings a man greater respect than yams, and ‘Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty—the new year’ (26). Yet, even though the New Yam Festival is without question one of the few exclusively male-affirming events in the community, women do more than just take an active part in making the event happen. It is the women’s presence that adds nuance and colour to the ceremony which cannot conceivably take place without the sheer sense of spectacle they contribute, in addition to being far and away the heart and soul of the occasion.

The stellar performance of Okonkwo’s wives during this event particularly helps to illuminate the sense of the importance attached to domesticity, giving a measure of the social, material and emotional investment that women make into the corporate life of their staunchly masculine society. Coming into their own, Okonkwo’s wives show they can hold their ground with anyone and live in complete harmony with their husband’s dreams and aspirations:

The festival was now only three days away. Okonkwo’s wives had scrubbed the walls and the huts with red earth until they reflected light. They had 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. The children were also decorated, especially their hair, which was shaved in beautiful patterns. The three women talked excitedly about the relations who had been invited, andthe children revelled in the thought of being spoilt by these visitors from motherland. Ikemefuna was excited. The New Yam Festival seemed to him to be a much bigger event here than in his own village, a place which was already becoming remote and vague in his imagination.(27)

All present in this scene of women’s communal work uniformly recognize one important fact: elegance, surface glamour, visual animation, and synergy set the enabling mood for festivity; that height and grandeur are the materials of a banquet. They are the conditions necessary for the release of the larger-than-life mood that a festival occasion aspires to attain in order to complete the emptying-out of individuals from their personal protective shells. That is why the female group steps up to the plate and helps with its multiple skills that men, by their calling and constitution, do not possess—cleaning, braiding, carrying out body and wall painting, as well as decoration. Of the attributes of the domestic setting within the closely knit traditional Igbo polygamous household that reveal themselves through women’s communal work, notable are the ways in which women learn to function as a team in order to secure the public good, favouring collectivity and unity over narrowly set personal interests. Since success in the assigned mission depends on everyone doing her part, self-interest has to yield to the selfless desire to promote the tradition of which all are a part because each wife can see her personal aspirations wrapped up in the welfare of the community to which the public image of her husband too is tied. Applying the skills of the decorative arts becomes an essential social obligation that the women dispense not just because of the capacity of colours to connect in fixing a certain (positive or negative) image of society, but, more importantly, because along with that it is the constitutive act of spiritual devotion.

It is in a cheerful and rambunctious mood that the women of Okonkwo’s household team up as they step up to cook. Indeed, showing so much dexterity and excitement, radiating such a high level of generosity and bubbling over with *joie de vivre* as if they were born to do this, they pool the children of the household into an effective kitchen team; thus Ekwefi and Ezinma prepare the hen; Nwoye’s mother (Okonkwo’s first wife) peels the yams; Ikemefuna, Nwoye, his two younger brothers and his sister Obiageli get the water.

Ezinma went outside and brought some sticks from a huge bundle of firewood. She broke them into little pieces across the sole of her foot and began to build a fire, blowing it with her breath.

‘You will blow your eyes out,’ said Nwoye’s mother, looking up from the yams she was peeling. ‘Use the fan.’ She stood up and pulled out the fan which was fastened into one of the rafters. As soon as she got up, the troublesome nanny-goat, which had been dutifully eating yam peelings, dug her teeth into the real thing, scooped out two mouthfuls and fled from the hut to chew the cud in the goats’ shed. Nwoye’s mother swore at her and settled down again to her peeling. Ezinma’s fire was now sending up thick clouds of smoke. She went on fanning it until it burst into flames. Nwoye’s mother thanked her and she went back to her mother’s hut.(30)

This is an especially accurate account of the typical atmosphere associated with women’s communal work in the polygamous household because it establishes the symbiotic roles of compliment and reproach as key components of instructional method related to the education of children, as well as the women’s vital part in the transmission of culture.

To show that the women are more adept than the men in setting up the enabling moods for festival during the bride-offering ceremony of Obierika’s daughter Akueke, emphasis is particularly on the master plot of Igbo traditional life: an ideology of social regeneration contingent upon involvement of women as key players in the game. The bride-giving ceremony is singularly critical to the continuation of family, the very source of life in the traditional Igbo setting, because bearing a child out of wedlock is not just rejected but tabooed. That is why public acknowledgement of the importance accorded to wifehood by honouring the bride’s mother implies recognition of the importance attached to wifehood by honouring motherhood, a crucial aspect of a broader practice by which the male suitor is required to formally and finally ratify his decision to commit to and invest in the life-long dual institutions of wifehood and motherhood. For this reason, the bride’s ‘suitor (having already paid the greater part of her bride-price) would bring palm-wine not only to her parents and immediate relatives but to the wide and extensive group of kinsmen called *umunna*’ (77).

Yet, while the Igbos set great store by getting the entire community involved in the bride-giving ceremony—because marriage for them is a communal affair, an event that binds not only two individuals but also whole communities together, and hence that depends for its survival as a corporate institution on the commitment of everyone—the bride-giving event is really ‘a woman’s ceremony’ and so ‘the central figures’ are ‘the bride and her mother’ (77).14 Hence, as Okonkwo’s three wives lead other women in giving public recognition to this importance accorded to the bride-giving ceremony, as an occasion to pay tribute to marriage and motherhood as some of the most important aspects of society’s cherished cultural capital, they show unusual largesse with their labour and substance:

Okonkwo’s family was astir like any other family in the neighbourhood. Nwoye’s mother and Okonkwo’s youngest wife were ready to set out for Obierika’s compound with all their children … Nwoye’s mother carried a basket of coco-yams, a cake of salt and smoked fish which she would present to Obierika’s wife. Okonkwo’s youngest wife, Ojiugo, also had a basket of plantains and coco-yams and a small pot of palm-wine. Their children carried pots of water.

Ekwefi was tired and sleepy from the exhausting experiences of the previous night. It was not very long since they had returned …

Ezinma was still sleeping when everyone else was astir, and Ekwefi asked Nwoye’s mother and Ojiugo to explain to Obierika’s wife that she would be late. She had got ready her basket of coco-yams and fish, but she must wait for Ezinma to wake.(77-8)

This passage indicates clearly that Achebe has a keen sensitivity to gender issues, and in ***Things Fall Apart*** he assigns the tender qualities to women who are the bloodline through which the life of their society flows. As indicated in the passage quoted above, the motive for action by the women emerges not only as a deep sense of social obligation but also as a genuine labour of love. The women of Okonkwo’s household take their social duty so seriously, they will allow nothing to hinder it. But they give so wholeheartedly of themselves for the public good, despite the level of self-sacrifice this entails, not just because Igbo custom demands that in performing ritual roles personal comfort of neccessity becomes a secondary consideration. Okonkwo’s wives give for their own enjoyment and satisfaction too; for them, giving is really a personal thing, a part of their very being; it is the justification for their very existence.15

A major theme of the novel is that while the Igbos generally care very deeply about the quality of the devotion of love, affection appears to be a special priority for women to whom the tender instincts come more naturally than they do to the menfolk. Usually the level of love interest is registered during the bride-giving ceremony by the quantity and quality of food and drinks served. The pattern of role distribution, by which the responsibility for the provision of the food rests squarely upon the wife-givers while the duty of supplying drinks for the banquet devolves upon the wife-takers, allows the two parties to strive aggressively to outdo each other. When interest is evenly balanced, as is the case shown at the event in Obierika’s residence, neither the wife-givers nor the wife-takers swerving in the gesture of support that they are seen to be offering, the result is explosive. Thus, Obierika’s compound becomes ‘as busy as an ant-hill. Temporary cooking tripods were erected on every available space by bringing together three blocks of sun-dried earth and making a fire in their midst’ (78-9). The rippling effect of the women’s obsessive behaviour on the men is described as follows:

Cooking pots went up and down the tripods, and foo-foo was pounded in a hundred wooden mortars. Some of the women cooked the yams and the cassava, and others prepared the vegetable soup. Young men pounded the foo-foo or split firewood. The children made endless trips to the stream.

Three young men helped Obierika to slaughter the two goats with which the soup was made. They were very fat goats, but the fattest of all was tethered to a peg near the wall of the compound. It was as big as a small cow. Obierika had sent one of his relatives all the way to Umuike to buy that goat. It was the one he would present alive to his in-laws.(79)

This passage offers poignant images of behaviour exemplary of the marriage institution: in a contest conducted with good humour, each party is striving to out-give the other: giving its very best, with love more than anything else and joyous abandon; not frugally but liberally. Yet, when reading closely, the force of gender makes it impossible not to see that the motives for the behaviour of the men and the women are entirely different. Women tend to give their very best because they believe that true love is outward-looking, not inward-looking. The men appear to catch the women’s spirit quickly, but only up to a point because their actions are more calculated. This is seen in the way that Obierika raises the stakes, offering his prospective in-laws ‘the fattest of all’ the goats he could find.

It is the character of Obierika who offers Achebe the opportunity to explore the differences between altruistic action by the women and that by the men, which is almost always self-interested. When Obierika gives of his best, it is as though he recognizes that difficult in-laws are notorious for being behind many a failed marriage and he wants to lay a solid groundwork for a future good relationship through actions that suggest deep love and generosity. Capitalizing upon the spirit embodied in the economy of marriage gift-exchange that one good turn deserves another is a way for him to secure the future of his daughter’s anticipated marriage.

Whatever the motive, however, the end always justifies the means when it comes to the security of marriage, something the Igbos generally see as a wise investment. That is why an assurance of the preservation of the institution of marriage invariably overrides any focus on difference or gender biases in the economy of the competitive gift-exchange. Thus, though the contest pattern of the gift-exchange in the bride-giving ceremony harks back powerfully to the pattern of the wrestling match in the novel’s opening pages, the Igbos are not confused about the differences. They are aware that unlike the wrestling bout, at which victory is won by egocentrism or self-interest, the engine of performance in marriage is fired by a love interest expressed in acts that are indicative of generosity toward the other partner. So ultimately actions speak louder than thoughts, and generosity is evidence that love gives because it is more concerened with the other person than it is concerned with the self.16

The Igbos seek the involvement of the entire community as one body—wife-givers and wife-takers as well as others; women, children and adults—acting in unison to make marriage work because it is implied that the goodwill of everyone is required, and all are duty-bound, to make marriage work, since everyone’s interest is at stake when it comes to this primary unit of society—the nuclear family—for which union between man and woman is the main foundation. If the bride-giving ceremony offers a touchstone for public celebration—a site where marriage is acknowledged as not only a personal but also a shared experience—it is because marriage is an institution that binds entire communities together, contrary to the impression that it is merely ‘a union of two family groups’ (Okafor, 2002: 121).

The epitome of the love affair that attends women’s communal endeavour in the traditional Igbo polygamous households occurs at the farewell feast thrown by Okonkwo for his mother’s people to end his exile. On that occasion, the exemplary sharing, delegation of duty, and sisterhood without rancour that women exhibit during communal labour find their fullest expression:

Ekwefi still had some cassava left on her farm from the previous year. Neither of the other wives had. It was not that they had been lazy, but that they had many children to feed. It was therefore understood that Ekwefi would provide cassava for the feast. Nwoye’s mother and Ojiugo would provide the other things like smoked fish, palm oil and pepper for the soup. Okonkwo would take care of meat and yams.(116)

Here it can be seen that, as the women of Okonkwo’s household work together like a well-oiled machine, everything falls into place: roles are accepted and played out with good humour by everyone, enabling the smooth take-off of the function. The reader is reminded that the purpose of the feast itself is to cement commonality among ‘all the descendants of Okolo who had lived about two hundred years before’ (116). When Uchendu, ‘the oldest member of this extensive family,’ prays, he confirms this ideal of human connectedness:

The kola nut was given to him to break, and he prayed to the ancestors. He asked them for health and children. ‘We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen. An animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsmen to scratch him.’ He prayed especially for Okonkwo and his family. He then broke the kola nut and threw one of the lobes on the ground for the ancestors.(117)

An interesting piece of Igbo traditional ritual rhetoric, Uchendu’s prayer contains a great deal that draws attention to the humanistic values of the Igbos. In their economy of values, relationship and good health are society’s most important treasures, not material goods which always come second; a marked contrast with Okonkwo’s materialistic obsessions over which anyone with a temperate judgement should be rightly concerned. That’s why, when offering his closing remarks, Uchendu thanks Okonkwo for giving them a lavish feast that is satisfying as well as spectacular and then gives his nephew a gentle reprimand, reiterating even further the primacy of human community in the Igbo people’s scale of values; the prime reason that the progressive drive toward excessive individualism which is rearing its ugly head in their midst is quite disturbing.

The narrative makes clear that the Igbos make relationship their core value because they consider unity a people’s greatest strength. Group participation is an expression of empathetic understanding required not only to cement solidarity among a people but also to maximize gratification and interchange of emotions to cement solidarity but to maximize gratification and interchange of emotions among a people. Indeed, the whole of the occasion of public commemoration is a dramatization of the supremacy of community, which is also the struggle for the banishment of egocentrism. Thus, like Uchendu, another elder also expresses the conviction that human bonds are the most important of life’s countless gifts. Friendship is important to this elder, not necessarily because the individual alone is insufficient but because when individual fixation gives way to the more inclusive and also more open companionship, it releases the full force of revelry: ‘A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their homes’ (118). He puts it another way:

‘When we come together in the moonlit village ground it is not because of the moon. Every man can see it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. You may ask why I am saying all this. I say it because I fear for the younger generation, for you people.’ He waved his arm where most of the young men sat. ‘As for me, I have only a short while to live, and so have Uchendu and Unachukwu and Emefo. But I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter’s dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan.’(118)

The traditional Igbo society’s main concern is to stabilize friendship; it erects a defensive wall against alienation because tradition venerates connection, understanding and unity. That is why the increasing movement toward excessive individualism represents a grave deformation of that native Igbo way of life. The Igbo way of valorizing life is through endowing people with an ultimate sense of worth. The magic of unity, of people coming together as one body, is cooperation whereby they share each other’s joys and burdens, and extend love and nourishment to one another. The anonymous elder attributes the collapse of things in contemporary times to aggressive individualism, the root cause of disunity; the sense of the falling apart of things inscribed in the title of the novel.

The vision of horror that presents itself to that anonymous elder, captured in the image of the hunter’s dog, conveys the sense of the madness and irrationality and chaos of things unleashed by the dissolution of the old order, returning us full circle to one startling reality: On the surface this world, feared to be on the verge of imminent doom (or upside down), appears merely to belong to men (witness the unnamed speaker’s exclusive references to ‘he,’ ‘kinsmen,’ ‘men’ and ‘his father and his brothers’). Nevertheless, despite this gender bias, women play a bigger role than is stated. All through his speech this elder refuses to acknowledge the women’s conspicuous presence but, by standing firmly behind their man, Okonkwo’s wives (just like the other women at the function) prove it’s not simply that women are pivotal to all of the refreshing and feasting—though there is no doubt it is their cooking which guarantees that everyone in attendance gets fed and refreshed. More importantly, women are visibly the prime agency that ensures the transformation of society’s quest for ritual purification through social accommodation. Through their work, the women play a spiritual role which helps to ease Okonkwo’s transition from a deeply troubled exile in Mbanta into what all believe will be a triumphant return to his Umofia homeland after what he himself calls ‘seven wasted and weary years’ (115). The vibrations created by the enchanting mood of the occasion make the connections between the human world and the mythical world of the gods and the goddess in the hills and the caves.17

Esther Y. Smith observes the dominance of ‘images of women in narratives dealing with traditional African society, including the jealous co-wives, the barren women, the mothers hoping for sons, and the heroines whose extraordinary abilities lift them to positions of leadership’ (1986: 30). It is remarkable to notice that, because Achebe’s narrative does not idealize women, in ***Things Fall Apart*** there is none of this type of assigning to women the stereotypic images that permeate fiction about traditional African society. As indicated in ***Things Fall Apart***, things are more complex than that: the African women who are represented by Okonkwo’s wives, the only women seen at close range and so logically drawn to any degree of detail in their individuality, are human, hence they have feelings like everyone else—feelings such as anger, anxiety, affection, ambition, fear, hopefulness, disappointment, exhilaration, sadness and joy—and they combine many statuses, major and ancillary. Thus, in addition to being daughters and wives and mothers, it is indicated that Igbo women can be priestesses like Chielo, the priestess of Agbala who boldly dominates everyone and everything including men and other women as well as nature—the hills and the caves and ‘the outer silence of the night’ (70), whenever the spirit of possession takes hold of her; and some are farmers (as Okonkwo’s wives are); and they can fall sick like other people (as do Ezinma and Ekwefi). The complex lives of Okonkwo’s wives and Chielo particularly indicate that Igbo women do not consider any of their duties to be casual ones, or their multiple roles to be conflicting.18

But, in return for all their loyalty, obedience and support, what do Okonkwo’s wives, on behalf of their fellow womenfolk, receive from him? And what kind of father does he show himself to be? He rules his household like a tyrant, ‘bullying his wives, intimidating his son and ill-treating the young Ikemefuna’ (Palmer 1972: 54). Out of anger, he acts in contravention of tradition by beating his youngest wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace. His misdemeanour is described by Ani, the goddess of the Earth, as an ‘evil’ that ‘can ruin the whole clan’ (22). Then he repeats the same mistake by shooting at another wife, Ekwefi, for cutting the leaves of a banana tree during the New Yam Festival, and thus nearly becomes a wife murderer, leaving readers to wonder what to make of the fact that, while cutting the leaves of a banana tree may appear insensitive, Igbo women are no strangers to the traditional use of banana leaves for cooking.

**The Intersection of Family Life and Public Duty**

All the textual evidence points to the liminality of Okonkwo’s existence, to the fact that he is always full of surprises regarding the extremity to which he can push his actions, evidence of the deadly imbalance in his personality. As Paula Berggren rightly observes, while Okonkwo ‘stammers under strong emotion and has recourse to his fists; he is arrogant and even a bully, yet he has an unadmitted tender side that appears in his relationship to his wife Ekwefi, his caring for Ezinma during her fever, and his attachment to Ikemefuna, whose death shatters him for days’ (1997: 495). It has to be pointed out that the full effect of all these situations of fleeting moments of imperfectly suppressed affection alternating with unexpected moments of incivility and cruelty is disastrous for his family because it negates clear and consistent patterns of behaviour.

A consequence of the arbitrariness and inconsistency of uses of rules and procedures to deal with conduct that is out of line is that it makes Okonkwo become unable to create a positive household climate that rewards appropriate behaviour. This causes his family no small amount of confusion. Okonkwo’s wives and children are constantly on edge, living in an atmosphere in which they do not know what to expect next. It is hardly surprising, given this unpredictability, rashness and poor home-management skills, that many of the family members become rebellious.

Nwoye is the starkest victim of all of this. Okonkwo’s inability to challenge Nwoye to live according to his prescribed pattern of conduct particularly raises the issue of how a parent’s good intentions can go completely awry if not backed by a coherent, well-thought-out, and systematically implemented action plan. The root cause, without question, of Okonkwo’s fractured relationship with Nwoye is their diametrically divergent outlook. Okonkwo wants to bring Nwoye up, as Emmanuel Obiechina puts it nicely, ‘in the warrior tradition by telling him “masculine stories of violence and bloodshed,” while Nwoye prefers “the stories that his mother used to tell,” which include the cosmic myth of the primeval quarrel of Earth and Sky’ (1993: 128). It doesn’t take a lot of effort to see the problem of a struggle to control the household space in the relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye. But the matter of the disconnection between Nwoye and Okonkwo goes well beyond the fight over power. Important an element as Oedipal rivalry evidently is as a contributory factor in the conflict, more important is a decided lack of effective communication between father and son, for while it is obvious that Okonkwo has good intentions and evidently loves Nwoye dearly, it is also clear that he never once lets Nwoye know this. Instead, all Nwoye ever feels is the cold effect of his father’s stern disciplinary hand.

One senses that all of the disciplinary action that Okonkwo directs at Nwoye stems out of the temper of a habitual worrywart with a tremendous capacity for love. For instance, correcting Nwoye harshly for not understanding ‘the difficult art of preparing seed-yams’ (23) is the result of Okonkwo’s being overtly anxious about the young man’s slow response to instruction. Okonkwo sees a young man’s future as exclusively wrapped up in manliness. For him, therefore, Nwoye’s poor showing in sturdiness, the manner of real men, is very disappointing because it’s almost as if disorderly succession is occurring and the grandfather’s personality is being passed down to the grandson. In short, Okonkwo is apprehensive about Nwoye’s future because he perceives clear signs that the boy might end up a failure like his grandfather Unoka.

True, common sense should have told Okonkwo that a compromise is possible. But, characteristically enough, he doesn’t have the discernment to grasp the lesson that the keys to a parent not alienating his children are treating them with respect and constant dialogue. Yet if Okonkwo could realize it, he does not really have to look far to find an action plan, since it is shown up most emphatically in his own home by the peerlessness of his relationship with his favourite daughter Ezinma, although he erroneously holds Obierika’s relationship with his son Maduka in greater esteem—thus giving himself a reason to become progressively more envious of his friend.

The lesson that Okonkwo could take from his matchless relationship with Ezinma is lost on him because of his over-determined drive to blot out everything outside the bounds of his ambition to raise a boy for purposes of succession. The alternative to persuasion is the persistent authoritarian method Okonkwo uses in parenting. The more his orders escalate into threats and intimidation, the more Nwoye continues to defy him. But what Okonkwo cannot anticipate is the resentment to which Nwoye’s suspicion that he has something to do with Ikemefuna’s cold-blooded murder gives vent. Nwoye’s missing the spirit of his father’s good intentions causes their already fractured relationship to snap entirely when he commits the ultimate defiant act of converting to Christianity.

Replete as Okonkwo’s conduct is with many contradictions, it also raises concerns about his lack of real authority, if authority is conceived as the power to have everything submit to one without one’s having to exert much effort. It is weird enough that Okonkwo should presume his son would spontaneously esteem his authority, whereas he himself has despised and rejected his own father. Even more weird is the indication that not even his relationship with Ezinma is as without a cloud of uncertainty as might be thought, since it is not really the person of Ezinma he admires but the idea of who he conceives her to be, the potential she represents—his idea of what she could be were she to be a male child, an inverted image of a model son. His not really loving her for who she is but rather for an unfulfilled aspiration thus calls into question the admiration he claims to profess for her, since this attitude is in the final analysis more revealing of the size of his ego. Okonkwo’s unrealized desire is to raise a male child who is as lofty and reserved as himself. He sees these traits in their undeveloped forms in Ezinma; this is the primary source of their mutual attraction to each other.

Some critics believe that Okonkwo is not entirely lacking in delicacy; Ikemefuna’s death is ironically cited as an episode that helps bring the tender aspect of Okonkwo’s personality to light. The misunderstanding here is the fact that Okonkwo’s distress is not really out of sympathetic identification with the ill-fated lad. Rather, he is truly more troubled by other matters. Primarily, it is having to mount a public defence against the reproachful judgement of his friends and other community leaders for his role in the boy’s murder that upsets Okonkwo. As he struggles within himself to deal with the persistent unrest in his mind due to the lack of a diversionary activity in his household to take up his attention during that season of the year, he himself says that it makes no sense for ‘a man who has killed five men in battle to fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number’ (45).

We should not gloss over the fact that if Ikemefuna’s death causes Okonkwo some uneasiness, his discomfort springs far less out of an unselfish feeling for the boy’s fate than from his egotism, his own self-serving ends: the loss of what is unquestionably the positive influence Ikemefuna in the three years of living in his family has brought to bear on Nwoye to the extent that the boys ‘no longer spent the evenings in mother’s hut while she cooked’ (37). Indeed, so pleased is Okonkwo with the changes he sees around them that he begins to encourage ‘the boys to sit with him in his *obi,*’ where he tells them ‘stories of the land—stories of violence and bloodshed’ (37). It is therefore not without reason that Ikemefuna’s death should assail Okonkwo with some sense of loss. The obsessive impulses that precipitate the unrest in Okonkwo’s mind after the boy’s death are not all that different from those emotions which drive him out, in disregard of the advice of Ezeudu and Obierika, to murder his foster-son in the first place: his own grotesque self-absorption, egocentrism and self-interest.

When the execution squad sets out on its mission to exact fulfilment of the oracle’s pronouncement, Okonkwo could have stayed home. But, intent upon satisfying his ego-driven ambitions, he not only wilfully joins it, but, curiously enough, takes it upon himself to deliver the fatal blow that dismembers the boy in his final moments. Okonkwo’s main motivation is a grotesque desire to project and protect his own image as a warrior:

One of the men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back, and the man growled at him to go on and not stand looking back. The way he said it sent cold fear down Ikemefuna’s back. His hands trembled vaguely on the black pot he carried. Why had Okonkwo withdrawn to the rear? Ikemefuna felt his legs melting under him. And he was afraid to look back.

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, ‘My father, they have killed me!’ as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak.(43)

Okonkwo is driven to kill to make people think he still has it all together; so he takes a human life because he wants to look good. But contrary to his thoughts, his execution of his own foster-child is no heroic display, for it rather turns the stomach as a vile act of cowardice. Although the gory incident is obviously too chilling, too painful, too tragic to allow a dispassionate interpretation of its motivation, it is not surprising that it has far-reaching repercusions.19

For one thing, Okonkwo’s action is not lightly forgiven by either of the men, Obierika or Ezeudu, who warned him against it; neither is it absolved by his son, Nwoye. With even more important ramifications, it is not pardoned by the gods and goddesses of the land, who appear to exact an uncanny retribution for it. Indeed, Ikemefuna’s killing, as it turns out, becomes spilled blood that causes more blood to be spilled: as Obierika predicted, ‘the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families’ (46). The gods and goddesses, it seems, allow no one opportunity for repentance. And so, not long after the event, Ezeudu, the first to bear news of the gods’ ruling for the murder, not only loses his own life but his own son is accidentally killed at his funeral; and killed by none other than Okonkwo, whom Ezeudu had discouraged passionately from having anything to do with the ritual murder. Then, Okonkwo is himself subsequently forced into exile, where his career suffers one reversal after another.

**European Conquest: Transgression and Dislocation, or Salvation and Rehabilitation?**

Critics do not agree on the value of creating a calibrated scale on which to situate the legacy of the European occupation. Some think it merely one milepost on the long trail of changes the ever-evolving Igbo society has undergone, and which it soon readily navigated by allowing its citizens to assimilate what they found useful and reject what they found offensive within the new culture. To others the process is known as European intervention, an ostensibly altruistic mission that brought many positive changes to Africa, such as leveling the playing field by creating equal opportunities for all through Western education. Only European rule, in the opinion of these observers, held out the promise of rescuing the souls of the lost through Christianity; alleviating poverty through the monetary economy; eradicating the embedded injustice of the traditional African society by doing away with the existing social stratifications tied up with caste or class structures like the *osu* among the Igbos, the murder of twin babies, and generally bringing civilization to the benighted continent through the construction of good roads and the delivery of good healthcare measured by the provision of hospitals and clinics and modern medicine.20

Still others prefer the terminology of ‘European takeover’ as a more appropriate vocabulary for capturing the sense of the dramatic transformation caused by the imposition of European rule on Africa and the fundamental changes it forced upon the people both in the public sphere and in the private world upon which it impinged. These commentators refer to the collapse of the Igbo way of life and blame it on the burden of irreconcilable alien ideas and practices that starkly confound the natives. Since it’s not as if Africans had any choice in the matter, the changes brought by the European presence are bitterly decried as the outcome of an unjust act of transgression. This is the position taken by Obierika in a conversation with Okonkwo not long after his return from exile:

‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’

‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act as one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.’(124-5)

The importance of unity and of other inherited values and norms of behaviour to the traditional Igbo society is here adumbrated in Obierika’s lament about the confusion unleashed by the introduction of a new way of life. Whether carried out by quiet, peaceable means (in places like Umofia) or by violent military methods (as elsewhere, in places like Abame), pacification has an identical result in displacing the old order in Africa and causing bitter division and disorder among a people who once were united by a common identity. Therefore, in the view of some commentators, by failing to rally support effectively to ward it off, Okonkwo’s role is symbolic of the local leadership’s implication in the triumph of the British occupation of Igboland.

It is important to bear in mind the remark made by David Carroll in his influential study of Achebe. Arguing with his characteristic flair, he describes ***Things Fall Apart***’s greatest contribution to world literature as residing in the composite image it provides of a tribal society working quite vibrantly as a living organ. Carroll surmises that critics who read this work with the usual expectations of the conventional novel will miss its central focus. He proposes that in ***Things Fall Apart*** Achebe did not simply replicate European fiction but added to the existing corpus in a significantly original way, to the extent that there is a surprising element to his creativity which lies in the presentation of a vivid communal consciousness. In the traditional novel the reader is ‘nurtured on the attenuated diet of individual self-consciousness and introspection,’ but in ***Things Fall Apart*** ‘the modulation from the communal life of the village to the individual consciousness and back again is unexpectedly powerful’ (1990: 32-5).21

Carroll’s study is itself a rare achievement; at once *explication de texte,* close reading, an exercise in value-making or evaluation and cultural studies, whose insightfulness makes it essential reading for all who wish to understand the craft of Achebe’s fiction. In making a special claim for ***Things Fall Apart***’s significance, he examines several passages in great detail. These include the arrival of the *egwugwu* or the ancestral spirits to settle a marriage dispute, the movement of the seasons marked by the arrival of the locusts and of the harmattan, as well as the case of Okonkwo and his sons ‘repairing the walls of their compound’ (Carroll, 1990: 34). All of these events illustrate, Carroll concludes, how ‘the subtle rhythms of village life condition the characters’ response to the events of the novel’ (35). A unique achievement of ***Things Fall Apart*** lies, therefore, in its depiction of ‘a clan in the full vigour of its traditional way of life, un-perplexed by the present and without nostalgia for the past. Through its rituals the life of the community and the life of the individual are merged into significance and order. This is most apparent in the village meetings which, interspersed through the action, give the novel so much of its special character’ (32). Such is ***Things Fall Apart***’s departure from the tradition of European fiction, it calls for a readjustment of readerly sensibilities for its contribution fully to be grasped. With Achebe’s novel,

No longer is individual introspection the fictional norm as in the European novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It now appears foreign and unnatural, so that when the narrator begins to delve into the single mind we anticipate with foreboding an unpleasant turn of events. The individual seems vulnerable in his solitude and introspection; it is with relief that we see him reabsorbed into the community. There, his doubts and fears can be exorcised publicly and ritualistically. This is the dimension of the novel to which previous fiction has not accustomed us—the direct translation of problems, moral, political, and religious, into public debate and action.(Carroll, 1990: 35)

It’s the vibrancy of the Igbo culture on display that makes the conflict that threatens to break it down not only all the more dramatic but also disconcerting. Far from being the vision of disorder and darkness painted by Europe, this is a society running smoothly on its own system of law and justice, morality and religion; its own method of burying its dead, and of self-regeneration.

In the full force of the law brought to bear in restoring the bad marriage of Uzowulu and Mgbafo, for instance, readers find a clear exemplification of the sense not only of the sanctity in which the institution of marriage is held by this society but also its notions of law and justice. Because M. Keith Booker offers a neat summary of that episode in terms that can hardly be improved upon, he is worth quoting at length:

In one of the book’s key demonstrations of the workings of justice in Umofia, the village elders meet to adjudicate a martial dispute in which the woman Mgbafo has fled the household of her husband, Uzowulu, because he has repeatedly beaten her (sometimes severely) for nine years. The legal proceedings are restricted to males, and no women (including Mgbafo) are allowed inside the hut where they occur … In the proceedings, Uzowulu presents his case, asking that Mgbafo be ordered to return to him. Then, Mgbafo’s brother argues that she should be allowed to remain with him and her other brothers apart from her abusive husband. The elders (some of whom seem to regard the case as too trivial to be worthy of their attention) order Uzowulu to offer a pot of wine to Mgbafo’s brothers in restitution. They refuse even to cast blame on the abusive husband, though the latter occurs not so much because they regard him as blameless as because they they see their role as one of restoring the peace rather than casting blame.(2003: 253-4)

The Igbo traditional legal approach is seemingly self-contradictory. It appears to refuse to draw a fine line, a sharp distinction, between right and wrong, good and evil. It then seeks to use both oppositions to achieve reconciliation, rapprochement, when in fact these two extremes would seem to be irreconcilable. The implication here is that the Igbo legal system shows a disinclination to bring into direct confrontation the rightness and wrongness of cases couples bring before it because it is society’s greater priority to speed up the healing process than to declare the winner or loser in a marital tussle. That’s why, ultimately, what the system recommends as the most effective antidote to marital discord is the attitude of burying the hatchet, though society in no way encourages married couples to bury their heads in the sand. If we consider that decline of family is the inevitable tragic consequence that will follow were the institution of marriage to be allowed to collapse, we can see the wisdom of the style of evasion employed in favour of preserving that sacred institution. Thus, whereas cases like those which lead to Okonkwo’s banishment from Umofia give the impression that the Igbo society is unforgiving and pays every crime a pound of flesh for a pound of flesh, marriage appears exceptional.

In conclusion, it might be observed that a marvel of ***Things Fall Apart*** is therefore how a story about the male struggle for authority and respect as well as economic and political empowerment masks a more disturbing tale about a divided sense of self and how women achieve power and respect within a patriarchy. The story also imbeds a narrative of dispossession that alters the meaning of life for an entire group of people who find themselves in an increasingly dichotomous world that begins to disconnect them from many of their vital native beliefs, norms, linguistic habits, and rituals. The novel’s narrative nexus lays much stress on this drama of the collective dislocation of a society which walked a path that was derailed, marked by discontinuity and arbitrary external control; but it also takes in the beginning stories of European conquest, a mission that fed on the presumption that Europe was called upon to bring enlightenment to a people who largely prove unappreciative of the gifts of modern civilization. Mainly because we witness a feast celebrating the pleasures of traditional communal life, the message that it is about to be destroyed completely comes with the ultimate stamp of irony.

**Notes**

1. Although South African author Sol T. Plaatje’s *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (1930), a novel that incorporates oral tradition, Biblical teachings and political commentary in presenting a cultural history of an indigeneous African group, is usually considered the first elegant work of realistic historical fiction written by a continental African, its religious tone and didactic narrative style have not exercised a decisive influence on mainstream African fiction. It is notable that several works by other African authors exist in the genre of historical fiction, but *Things Fall Apart* establishes its difference quite clearly from all of them with its depth and breadth of perception in portraiture. The list is long and distinguished, and includes Camara Laye’s *The African Child* (1955), Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *The River Between* (1965), Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine* (1966), John Munonye’s *The Only Son* (1966), and Wole Soyinka’s *Ake* (1981). *Things Fall Apart* lacks the narrow focus of either Laye’s *The African Child* or Soyinka’s *Ake,* for example, both of which are respectively preoccupied with the singular topics of nostalgic longing for a lost idyllic past and obsession with childhood and growing up; in contrast to the sentimental frame of those texts, *Things Fall Apart* has unique realistic styles and setting, a rich texture as well as a broad range. It is astonishing in that it combines a detailed pyschological penetration mapping tribulations in father-daughter and father-son relationships with events of the public space, such as practices relating to judicial procedures and burial, along with brief but telling references to ritual behaviour and religious observance and the social organization of the Igbos, their patterns of kinship and male succession, extending the same illuminated descriptions to the account of the up to now insufficiently told story of the tragic encounter with Europe.

2. Notable among these scholars are Abiola Irele, 1965: 25; Paula Berggren 1997: 497; Bernth Lindfors, 1968: 6; Gareth Griffiths, 1971: 89; Eustace Palmer, 1972: 53; Biodun Jeyifo, 1990: 62; Chinwe Christiana Okechukwu, 2001: 15.

3. See G. D. Killam, 1969: 24; Arthur Ravenscroft, 1969: 16; Charles Larson, 1972: 38-9; Eustace Palmer, 1972: 48; David Cook, 1977: 72; Nelson Wattie, 1979: 70; David Carroll, 1990: 35; Lewis Nkosi, 1981: 32; M. Keith Booker, 1998: 71; and Clement Okafor, 2002: 118.

4. Excellent discussions of uses of symbolism in *Things Fall Apart* abound in several important essays by Eldred D. Jones, Bu-Buakei Jabbi, Donald Weinstock and Cathy Ramadan among others (see Guide to Further Reading). For example, the main thrust of Jabbi’s argument is that in *Things Fall Apart* ‘realistic details sometimes become symbolic without giving up their literal or physical bases; for surface fact is hardly ever completely sacrificed on the altar of symbolic propensity. His art is ever so concealed!’ (1978: 140). Weinstock and Ramadan state, ‘Achebe uses a blend of realistic and symbolic modes, with symbolism worked in so smoothly that it becomes an integral part of the realistic texture’ (in Innes and Lindfors [eds], 1979: 127). But my focus on the symbolism of the wrestling contest is, I believe, an entirely new one.

5. In David Cook’s view, ‘Okonkwo is a hero in that he shows exceptional bravery, firmness, even greatness of soul. A hero is by definition an exceptional figure and so he does not simply embody the average virtues of his society in a fairly typical form; he is very far from being an Everyman’ (1977: 66). Gerald Moore endorses this view, saying it is ‘Obierika who really represents the more typical role. Okonkwo is more like a sort of super-Igbo; an exaggeration of certain qualities admired by his people, but at the expense of others which the rounded man is expected to possess’ (1980: 127).

6. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), p. 3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

7. For details on the capitalistic traits which earn the Igbos the reputation of being a highly enterprising and individualistic people, see especially the elaborate studies by G. T. Basden, 1938; C. D. Forde and G. I. Jones, 1950; and Victor C. Uchendu, 1965.

8. See Florence Stratton, 1994: 25-7; Martin Klein, 2000: 30.

9. Eskia Mphahlele’s take on this matter is noteworthy. Arguing against the notion that Okonkwo’s death signals the death of tradition, he says one cannot deny the violent challenge posed to ‘the traditional communal structure of African society’ by ‘new ways of life—economics, centers of authority, education, all of which tend to pull the individual away from the communal center,’ but when ‘tragedy befalls a character, the community is not ruined thereby’ because of a built-in power to absorb the shock; hence when ‘Okonkwo makes his exit by suicide … no-one outside the close family circle is shattered by the event. There is a group feeling around it, yes. But there is none of the theatrical tragedies like say the deaths of Hardy’s Tess and Mayor of Casterbridge; of Conrad’s Lord Jim; of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, like the deaths of so many other lonely characters that people much of Western fiction. There seems to be a contradiction here, but maybe because the main characters are rooted in a communal life, their tragedies are absorbed by the community’ (1974: 254). This is precisely the point: the extent of the fragmentation of Okonkwo’s community is indicated by the fact that it is so deep, collective resistance is completely inoperable.

10. Surprising as it may seem, even some critics have accepted the misconception that Unoka’s life is worthless. Charles R. Larson states: ‘In Igbo terms, his life was a failure; during his life his only distinction was the accumulation of many debts; and in a brief dramatic scene we are shown an incident from Unoka’s past where a man who had loaned him money attempted to get it back’ (1972: 33). Among the welter of critical interpretations attempting to appraise the portrait of Unoka, Oladele Taiwo puts it best when he states that ‘Unoka is not the worthless man that his son makes him out to be. He is an accomplished artist whose expertise is much sought after by other villages. The picture of him which comes through from the pages of the novel is one of almost unqualified approval. Given this situation, the critic is entitled to wonder why the only use made of Unoka in the novel is the negative motivation he provides for Okonkwo’ (1976: 121). See also A. G. Stock (1979: 88).

11. In obvious reflection of real life, literature is filled with stories of orphans or abandoned children travelling circuitous and dangerous routes in attempts to recover lost parents (Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* readily come to mind); it seems therefore somewhat paradoxical that a son as fortunate as Okonkwo to be living at home with a father, who is so loving into the bargain, would show such an absolute lack of appreciation of a father whom many would be eager to give up everything to have.

12. Arguing an alternative viewpoint that presents Okonkwo as a victim of his circumstance, Eustace Palmer states, ‘Okonkwo is what his society has made of him, for his most conspicuous qualities are a response to the demands of his society. If he is plagued by fear of failure and of weakness it is because his society puts such a premium on success; if he is obsessed with status it is because his society is preoccupied with rank and prestige; if he is always itching to demonstrate his prowess in war it is because his society reveres bravery and courage, and measures success by the number of human heads a man has won; if he is contemptuous of weaker men it is because his society has conditioned him into despising cowards. Okonkwo is the personification of his society’s values, and he is determined to succeed in this rat-race’ (1972: 53). See also Oladele Taiwo (1976: 114) and Gerald Moore (1980: 127) for slight modifications of this view.

13. Discussions of portraits of women in Achebe’s fiction are often influenced by preconceived notions that both gender bias and lack of talent generally prevent African male authors from creating authentic, convincing female characters. In line with such opinions, Achebe is specifically accused of placing women in subservient roles; fashioning women in motherhood roles; consigning them to menial domestic duties; or only giving them power as priestesses or as mythological figures. See, among others, the studies by James Olney (1972); Phanuel Egejuru (1982); Rhonda Cobham (1990); Florence Stratton (1994); Catherine Bicknell (1998); Obioma Nnaemeka (1998); Chioma Opara (1998); Martin Klein (2000). However, in her important ethnographic study of traditional Igbo women, Ifi Amadiume adduces enormous evidence to support the view that in traditional Igbo society women do not customarily question patriarchy or hanker for equality with their menfolk; rather they ask only for the right to occupy their own spaces, within which the women derive their greatest personal satisfaction as productive members of society. These spaces include both domestic and public domains such as the home and the market and ritual arenas as well as social occasions; and cooking and cleaning are not roles women despise or take lightly. ‘Women were also concerned with the welfare of the town. Decisions to contribute money for public works and repairs or for other services were taken at their meetings. In times of epidemics or great unrest, women consulted diviners for the well-being of *Nnobi.* If the dry season became too dry, hot and unbearable, the Women’s Council met and contributed money for visiting the rain makers’ (Amadiume, 1987: 66). Catherine Acholonu, another woman of Igbo origin, presents a similar view (1985). In light of the weight of confirmation from the research of those like Amadiume and Acholonu lend to the images of women portrayed in *Things Fall Apart,* it seems clear that critics who accuse Achebe of projecting disempowering images of women are applying Western standards of authority entirely remote and alien to the Igbos.

14. As a part of the elaborate safeguards the traditional Igbo society has devised for the marriage institution, suitors are offered many opportunities to review their feelings before rushing into a serious commitment of this nature. In particular, in addition to bearing the monetary costs of the marital union, the male suitor is given several chances to reconsider taking on the burden of a major life decision of this magnitude. These checks and balances are not always entirely shock-proof, as the bad marriage of Uzowulu and Mgbafo clearly shows, but their overall usefulness is beyond dispute.

15. It is the view of some critics that Okonkwo acts in the same spirit when he obeys an order from the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves and participates in the execution of Ikemefuna in defiance of advice from his loyal friend Obierika and then more insistently from the community elder Ezeudu. Damian Opata (1987) argues in particular that Okonkwo acts in response to his recognition of the gods’ sovereignity, not wilfully, so he is not morally answerable for what he has done; as a man, he is merely an instrument for the purposes of the gods that must be fulfilled.

16. Based on this love practice alone, Phanuel Egejuru would seem to be right in observing that ‘there is nothing so far in African literature to parallel love stories like, for instance, Tristan and Iseult, or Abelard and Heloise; nor do we have anything to liken to Romeo and Juliet, Manon Lescaut, Madame Bovary, and a host of other passionate love figures of European Literature’ (1982: 83). Egejuru attributes the absence of the passionate love theme in African literature to the contrasting lifestyle and world-views of Africans and Westerners. She makes the claim that, while ‘Love is seen … as very fundamental to the Western concept of self-fulfillment, and it is basic to intimate personal relationships … [to] an African, it is unthinkable for a man to abandon his ancestral home in pursuit of a woman in the name of love’ (83). This of course ignores widespread expressions of the passionate love theme in oral literature of many African peoples, obviously not excluding the Igbos. See, for example, p’Bitek (1974), Okpewho (1985) and Kapteijns (1999).

17. Like most enforced removals from home, Okonkwo’s exile in Mbanta is marked by emotional turbulence—moments of excruciating pain and longing that he tries hard to cover up. Thus ‘he regretted every day of his exile’ despite the goodwill of his mother’s kinsmen who ‘had been very kind to him.’ The naming of his children reflects this state of his mind: ‘He called the first child born to him in exile Nneka—“Mother is Supreme”—out of politeness to his mother’s kinsmen. But two years later when a son was born he called him Nwofia—“Begotten in the Wilderness”’ (115).

18. By far the most compelling demonstration of the power of women in the society of the Igbos depicted in *Things Fall Apart* is the one which occurs in the scene where Chielo, priestess and oracle to Ani, abducts Ezinma and holds her hostage for hours in the caves and hills on a dark and lonely night. Despite the fact that second wife Ekwefi is extremely terrified to the point of being hysterical with the fear that she might lose her only child, and her husband Okonkwo is just as fearful for the safety of his favourite daughter, both of the panic-stricken parents are helpless to alter the course of events.

19. The popular opinion of the act is that it is indisputable proof of Okonkwo’s brutality (e.g. Killam, 1969: 20; Obiechina, 1975: 213; Wren, 1980: 44; Carroll, 1990: 42-5; Taiwo, 1976: 118; Nnolim, 1977: 58; Brown (in Innes and Lindfors [eds], 1979: 32); Okpewho, 2003: 34-5), although we cannot discount the finely argued dissenting view of Damian Opata (1987), who says that the incident suggests the preeminent power of the gods and the capricious uses to which they put human beings.

20. Among these are critics such as Romanus Okey Muoneke (1994: 108-12); Neil ten Kortenaar (1991); and of course the many citizens of Umofia who, we are told in the novel, have begun to appreciate ‘the trading store’ built by the white man as well as the fact that ‘for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umofia’ (Achebe, 1958: 126).

21. Even in arguing against the main premise outlined by Carroll about *Things Fall Apart*’s essential difference from the European fictional norm, Eustace Palmer unintentionally lends it confirmation when he states: ‘Those who open this novel hoping to find a description of noble savagery where the tensions of modern Western society do not exist, are likely to be disappointed. Umofia society is proud, dignified, and stable, because it is governed by a complicated system of customs and traditions extending from birth, through marriage to death. It has its own legal, educational, religious, and hierarchical systems, and the conventions governing relations between the various generations are as elaborate as any to be found in a Jane Austen novel’ (1972: 48-9).

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