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Fifty Years on: Problematizing the Heroic Ideal in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart.*

ABSTRACT. Chinua Achebe's classic novel *Things Fall Apart*, clocks 50 in 2008, and, expectedly, the global literary community is celebrating this great African masterpiece, a permanent staple of the academic curriculum of most tertiary institutions of learning around the world. As part of the commemoratives in honour of the work and its creator, I have chosen to do a *reappraisal* of a tiny aspect of the numerous interpretive interest which *Things Fall Apart* continues to generate, namely, the subject of *heroism*. Mainstream or conventional readings of *Things Fall Apart* ascribe the hero of the novel to the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, and, consequently cast Unoka, Okonkwo's father, and Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, in a bad light. We are constrained to re-examine these positions, and, thereby contest their apparent validity. We also use various literary theories to evaluate Okonkwo's claim to heroism as we profile his tragic, grace-to-grass career.

KEY WORDS

Heroism, Tradition, Change, Ethics, Tragedy, Epic, Culture, Modernity.

Since the advent of its publication in 1958 *Things Fall Apart* as a novel has attracted much critical commentary both by African scholars and critics as well as non-African literary scholars. We might note in passing that the choice of the novel's title partly explains the aura of momentousness and pioneering distinctiveness which surrounds it as a piece of cultural production. For one thing, the novel's title is taken from W.B. Yeats' much-anthologized poem, "The Second Coming", a poem which is thought to make reference to "the apocalyptic theory of history", tellingly imaged by the "gyre", which in turn signifies the precarious fractiousness of contemporary society (Booker, 2003, 240). For another, Achebe's novel at its inception was something of a curiosity coming as it did during the dying years of British colonialism in Nigeria, in particular and Africa in general. Yet this "curio" element of *Things Fall Apart* has refused to wane or go away fifty years later. Needless to say the novel which is a staple of literary curriculum across the world has spawned its own burgeoning industry of theoretical and critical hermeneutics and *texte du explication*. This ceaseless and unrelenting "quarrying" of the novel's capacious caverns attests in large part to its enduring relevance as the fulcrum of African literary canon. Also, the novelist has been able to capture for all time the baffling ambivalence of the historical *moment* inscribed in the novel, rendered inimitably in a marvellous strategy of studied understatement and, more importantly, in a feat of self-cancelling, self-ironizing whirligig.

Indeed, it is hardly possible for a critic of the novel to wade his way through the accretive sedimentation of received opinions and perspectives on *Things Fall Apart* given the notion that five decades of consistent analysis of the novel should have exhausted most of the talking points arising from it. It is this kind of scenario which provoked Chinweizu to lament in a newspaper interview he granted *Sunday Sun* that some of our older, pioneer texts have "been criticised to death".

And if there is any novel from Africa which is particularly guilty of this charge, we think it is *Things Fall Apart*. For there is hardly any African literature student alive or dead who had not expressed an opinion on some aspects of the novel. Some of the expressed views are outright wrongheaded, others content themselves with parroting conventional, mainstream ideas while others, expectedly few and far between, manage to purview original and innovative interpretations and readings. All in all, *Things Fall Apart*, like a Great Mask dancing, has been given an all-round evaluation; yet these old answers keep throwing up new questions which in turn insist on satisfactory resolution *ad infinitum*. Accordingly, as Achebe's *Magnus opus* turns fifty, it behoves us to revisit some of the old but continually germane theoretical, aesthetic and ideological issues which have remained the abiding ground-base of African literary critical discourse. Our task in this regard is largely an effort of *reappraisal* of just an aspect of the issues surrounding the criticism of the literary phenomenon.

Much has been written about the supposed heroism of the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, that is Okonkwo vis-à-vis the "failure" and "weakness" of his father, Unoka and his son, Nwoye. In this connection, therefore, the whole idea of heroism as far as this novel is concerned centres around the family saga of the Unoka lineage. In Achebe criticism the standard practice is to deprecate Unoka and grant Nwoye grudging sympathy while Okonkwo almost always takes the eagle's feather: he is generally said to be *the* hero of *Things Fall Apart*. The auspicious occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the novel is therefore a proper forum at which we can take, for the umpteenth time, another closer look at the question of the heroic ideal as it relates to the triumvirate of Unoka, Okonkwo and Nwoye. According to Abiola F. Irele:

> Nwoye's story closes a family history that revolves around the troubled relationships between fathers and sons. Centred as it is on the personality and tragic fate of Okonkwo, this family history comprises the novel's narrative framework and functions as an allegory of the destiny of the society they

> inhabit and to which they relate in diverse ways. What this allegory signifies, in the particular historical and cultural context of Achebe's novel, is the state of internal crisis into which this society is plunged, a crisis that we have come to appreciate as intrinsic to its presiding ethos (134).

Since the collective destiny of the Umuofia tribe is tied to the fate of this family history, we need to pay closer heed to how Achebe adroitly characterises the troika, with particular emphasis on the main character, Okonkwo himself. In the opening chapter of *Things Fall Apart,* we are told that Okonkwo's wrestling victory over Amalinze the cat "was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights" (3). This novelistic expropriation of oral tradition, or, more specifically, epic tradition, aligns the narrative action with the demands of epic narrative. To that extent, the concept of heroism should more appropriately be investigated within the methodological paradigms of traditional (African) oral narrative.

Furthermore, the narrative action of *Things Fall Apart* clearly falls between the 1850s and the early 1900s, a period of time when the British colonialists were busy gearing up to carve up the so-called Dark Continent and despoil her in the name of colonialisation and Christian evangelism. If we therefore grant that Okonkwo is a figure in a pre-literate, pre-colonial (at the initial stages of his career) traditional African society, we shall then judge his "heroic" credentials on the touchstone of the epic tradition, on the one hand, and, the aesthetico-epistemological criteria of Euro-Christian ideology, on the other.

The question is, Who is a hero? What are the features or/and characteristics of a hero? And, by what yardsticks may a hero be measured? To reformulate this series of posers, let us avail ourselves of Dean A. Miller's comment on this definitional problem:

> The matter and method of deciding what questions are put to material selected and collected in pursuit of the typological hero seem to me most vital. Obviously I think that the right questions have not been asked with enough rigor, severity, or frequency, especially in respect to a significant definitional problem: the relationship of a central, even archetypic model of *the* hero to the constellation of *heroes*, in their sometimes subtly differentiated modal operations, and guises … we ought to try to decode the specified heroic forms,

> operations, and styles that one society or another will isolate, celebrate, and iconise out of all the shapes and generic varieties of heroism at hand (ixx).

Miller is by no means done yet. He inquires further:

> What is the nature of heroic individuality, and why and how is the hero so often defined by means of a code generated by a collectivity or group of his "peers"? How is he simultaneously placed *above* humankind, and therefore somewhere near the gods, and *below* the human, mixed with and mixed into the animal and even the monstrous, the teratic world? Why should a hero… carry not one sword, but two? And, finally, what stands behind or emerges from his perpetual and obsessive *affaire du coeur* with death itself? (x).

Now the question, who is a hero? "An individual is named the "hero" of a particular incident, which means that he or she had intervened in some critical situation in an extraordinary fashion, acting outside, above, or in disregard to normal pattern of behaviour, especially in putting his or her life at risk "(Miller 1). Thus, the traditional idea of heroism involves the element of the supernatural – "the supernatural tints and taints; the crude interventions of gods and the friendship or, even more grotesque, the imagined kinship of the hero with human-like animals, the encounters with monsters, the magical flights and otherworld adventures – the heroic defiance, in a word, of physical laws, in the impossible combinations of the human with the animal and the divine" (2). The French *Dictionnarie de l'Academic* of 1769 (its fourth edition) revealed a "progressive degradation" of the term: first, *hero* is given as a "demigod", then "a man who distinguishes himself in war by extraordinary acts", and finally as "a man who, on some occasion, betrays the marks of great pride (*grande fierte)* or of a remarkable nobility" (qtd. in Miller 2).

To pursue our search for the conceptual history of the hero further, we turn our attention to Liddell and Scott's *A Greek-English Lexicon*: The word itself is Greek – *heros* – and thus our initial view of the type is influenced by ancient Greek definitions. According to Miller, "[T]he dictionary's list of definitions lets us believe that a kind of linear development occurred in Greek: from Homer's archaic usage, where "hero" is used for "any free man" or, possibly, any significant man or "gentlemen" prominent in the epic or not; to Hesiod, who

sets the hero in an age of his own, a past age, marked by impressive, "legendary" place-names used as dramatic foci, such as Troy or Kadmeian Thebes, and anterior to the duller and smaller present; and finally to Pindar, who defines the hero as a semi-divine being, above men, below the gods" (3). By the same token, a widely accepted common notion of the "hero" is that of a mediator, "a conduit between the living world and whatever nonhuman powers and zones exist, or the allied conception of the "hero" as simply one of the dead …" (4).

The Homeric conception of the heroic ideal is twofold, viz:, the first is the powerful image of the physically perfect young hero dying for fame and escaping maturation (and therefore the "bad death" of an impotent and ugly old age) "by achieving a 'good death' that ends his physical history in combat. Everything in this line is concentrated on the *agon* of the essentially asocial individual" (4-5). Akhilleus is said to be the paradigmatic representative of the form or type of heroic ideal. The second line integrated the cult of the dead hero into the new socio-political entity of the Greek city-state, or *polis* (4).

At this juncture, we would like to consider a somewhat different impression of heroism, that is, the Aristotelian conception: the "hero" of Greek tragedy, according to Aristotle is a "noble" man, possessed of the tragic flaw of *hubris*, who is destroyed by divine intervention, such that the audience, exposed to the dramatic crisis, experiences *Katharsis*: it is moved to feel "pity and awe" (Miller 7). Terry Eagleton in his typically witty and wry style contends,

> "Aristotle says nothing of a tragic hero. Nor did the ancient Greeks in general employ the term. Aristotle mentions tragic protagonists, but the tragic action does not necessarily centre upon them. It is not the subject which holds the action together, in a kind of dramatic Kantianism. Characters for Aristotle, … are a kind of ethical colouring on the action rather than its nub. They are its bearers and supports rather than its sources … By and large, it is *events* which are tragic, not people" (77 Emphasis added)

However and in spite of this fine line trod by Eagleton, he goes on to quote Dorothea Krook in her *Elements of Tragedy*, arguing,

> "[T]he hero must be representative of humanity as a whole, but at the same time elevated above his fellows. His suffering must be expiatory, must be conscious rather than blind and must be accepted by both him and ourselves as necessary. This is so even if his transgression, like Oedipus's, is unconscious; the fact remains that cosmic order has been disrupted, and must be restored whatever the cost in human agony" (76).

We have so far tried in the foregoing excursus to sketch in broad strokes the constitutive issues involved in the drawing the portrait of the "hero" in the Eurocentric epic and classical tragic traditions.

We shall for now suspend comment on the Judeao-Christian motif immanent in the sub-textual as well as the inter-textual resonance in *Things Fall Apart.* We shall, of course, return to it in the latter part of this paper. But for now, let us briefly consider what might be termed the traditional (African) epic heroic ideal. In his important study entitled *The Epic in Africa: Toward a Poetics of the Oral performance*, Isidore Okpewho avers in his piquantly felicitous prose that the epic hero is distinguished by a number of attributes, among which include the hero's parental origins, his circumstances of birth, his unusual or "strange" early life, his outstanding physical attributes; his sense of inordinate ambition and his overweening pride or brusqueness. Okpewho furnishes illustrious examples of the traditional hero: Sunjata, the emperor of the ancient Mali Empire, Telamonian Ajax of the Achaean forces; Odysseus; Gilgamesh and Beowulf, Hektor and Ozidi and Achilles.

Since the epic is primarily a product of a heroic culture based as it is on the warrior ethic, personal honour and fame or, the claim to heroism is achieved through martial skill. Therefore in the traditional heroic myth the folk hero is set apart by his war-likeness, bravery and strength, both of body and mind.

In Okpewho's words:

> … the hero furiously craves for an opportunity to put his estimation of himself to the proof. Love of danger is thus a frequent corollary of self-esteem. The hero may not always die from the risks that he takes; in fact, his survival is proof of his invincibility or durability. But should he die, his death is not the pitiable or despicable one of a Narcissus, but rather an awe-inspiring one, because of the circumstances in which the life is hazarded (101).

Hence, Isidore Okpewho argues quite convincingly that the hero is "quite simply a comprehensive symbol of the ideals of human society and the dangers attendant upon such exaggerated expectations" (131). Many a hero accordingly owes his existence mainly and principally to a communal crisis – "The hero is welcome only on troubled days" as Seydou Camara says in *Kambili* (qtd in Okpewho 127).

As the epic hero takes his place as the bridgehead of communal destiny, his sights are set on "[H]onour, distinction, the dignity of life, a sense of transcendence of the limitations of common mortality – these then are major concerns of the heroic spirit, ideals that the heroic personality aims to actualize" (123).

It is important at this juncture to briefly ponder the role of the Igbo belief in *chi* vis-à-vis the issue of heroism in *Things Fall Apart*. To help us do this, we shall turn our attention to Achebe's own famous essay entitled *'Chi* in Igbo Cosmology'. In this article, Chinua Achebe in his typically thorough fashion examines the various aspects of this major Igbo belief. He tells us that:

> There are two clearly distinct meanings of the word *chi* in Igbo. The first is often translated as god, guardian angel, personal spirit, soul, spirit-double, etc. The second meaning is day or daylight but is most commonly used for those traditional periods between day and night or night and day. Thus we speak of *chi ofufo* meaning day break and *chi ojiji*, nightfall (93).

Achebe goes on to inform us that "in a general way we may visualise a person's *chi* as his other identity in spirit land – his *spirit being* complementing his terrestrial *human being*; for nothing can stand alone, there must always be another thing standing beside it" (93). Clearly, we must by now come to terms with the fact that, as Achebe himself argues rightly, "without an understanding of the nature of *chi* one could not begin to make sense of the Igbo world-

view" (93). And, as if to further complicate matters, the Igbo people did not "construct a rigid and closely argued system of thought to explain the universe and the place of man in it, preferring the metaphor of myth and poetry ..." (93).

Thus, anybody seeking to make sense of the Igbo world-view according to Achebe, "must seek it along their own way. Some of these ways are folk-takes, proverbs, proper names, rituals and festivals" (93). Hence in Igbo culture appear many oral narratives which serve as grand narratives as well as meta-critical commentaries on the human situation. Accordingly, we are told that the notion of duality is central and fundamental in Igbo thought. "Nothing is absolute. *I am the truth, the way and the life* would be called blasphemous or simply absurd" (94) in Igboland. Achebe opines further:

> The world in which we live has double and counterpart in the realm of spirits. A man lives here and his *chi* there. Indeed the human being is only one half (and the weaker half at that) of a person. There is a complementary spirit being, *chi*" (94).

This Igbo notion of duality tends to render the whole question of freewill and/or responsibility seriously problematic. How, we might venture to ask, does one hold culpable an offender who commits an infraction? And, conversely, are we right to reward a person for doing something exemplary or praiseworthy? Man-in-society, in the light of this Igbo belief, seems to strike one as a mere pawn on the cosmic chessboard of life; or, we may see him as a puppet being manipulated by his *chi*, the overarching puppeteer. We find this interesting scenario similar to what obtains in classical Greek literature in which an Achilles, for instance, has his job cut out for him by the Olympian gods, or, an Odysseus suffering misfortune at sea on his way back home after the war because the gods are interested on the one hand in destroying him, or on the other rescuing him, Yet, there appears not to be a clear-out, final explanation on this issue of the human-other-worldly (or supernatural / divine) nexus. Hence a person is rewarded for good deeds and punished for bad ones. This is

because, in spite of the overbearing role of one's *chi* in one's earthly situation, one is expected in the final analysis to have a say in one's own affairs.

Now having provided the foregoing theoretical background to our discussion of the concept of heroism in Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, we shall proceed to examine the finer details of Okonkwo's tragic career vis-à-vis the fate of his father, Unoka and his son, Nwoye. We are inevitably comfronted with the question again: Is Okonkwo a *truly* tragic (or epic) hero? Or can we in good conscience consider Unoka, or, even, Nwoye, the *true* hero of the novel? However, while attempting to answer these questions, we must bear in mind the cultural context within which the high drama of this family saga, on the one hand, and, on the other, the collective fate of Umuofia is framed. Perhaps, for us to be able to clearly chart the contours and the trajectory of the tragic career of the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, it might be necessary and useful for us to, first and foremost, subject the subplot of the Unoka story to a closer exegetical inquiry. In the words of the novel's narrator:

> 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.

The narrator goes on to tell us that, "Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back" (4). Unoka, we are told, is lazy and improvident.

Incapable of thinking about tomorrow, he lives for the moment, a man of peace and gentleness. What is more, he is said to be a coward who hates warfare or even the sight of blood, a way of life for which his people are renowned. As if to rub in this despicable image of Unoka, Chinua Achebe deftly juxtaposes him with another musician like him:

> Okoye was also a musician. He played on the *ogene*. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land (5).

This comparative portraiture of Unoka in relation to his friend and contemporary, Okoye, helps put Unoka's unenviable track record in bolder relief; and at his death, "he had taken no title at all and he was heavily in debt. Even before his death Unoka had once consulted *Agbala*, the priestess of the oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest (12). The priestess had told him: "you have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchet and your hoe…"(13). And as if all this life-long misadventure were not enough, the novelist finally clinches Unoka's tragic story by introducing metaphysical factors as responsible for his sad life:

> Unoka was an ill-fated man. He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave. He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess … He was carried to the evil forest and left there to die (13).

From the excerpted passage above, we can see that Unoka's failure has been partly blamed on his "bad *Chi*". According to Achebe,

> The Igbo believe that a man receives his gifts or talents, his character, indeed his portion in life generally-before he comes into the world. It seems there is an element of choice available to him at that point; and that his *chi* presides over the bargaining ... (97).

Therefore, Unoka's failure in life is a consequence of the "primordial bargain he had willingly struck with his *chi*" (97) in the spirit realm before his earthly sojourn. Hence, even if he had wanted to lead a particularly illustrious life, his "bad" chi would have frustrated him. The Igbo name *Chie Ekwero*, meaning "his chi does not agree" bears out our contention. Achebe further argues in the paper that if a man fails in life, it is due to "either the man has particularly intransigent *Chi* or else it is the man himself attempting too late to alter that

primordial bargain ... saying yes now when his first unalterable word had been no, forgetting that 'the first word gets to Chukwu's house'" (97). The impression we get on the whole is that it is quite difficult to apportion blame or responsibility in regard to Unoka's fate. We cannot maintain even-handedness in our judgement in this regard on whether Unoka's 'bad *chi*' is to blame or Unoka should share in the blame. However, beyond the intriguing nature of the source of Unoka's failure, Achebe tends to use him to advance his own authorial vision about his people's outlook on life.

The foregoing account is a brief summary of Okonkwo's father's story. We can only begin to appreciate the full ramifications of Unoka's failure when we bring ourselves to come to terms with the high social expectations normally associated with a heroic culture, one which lay high store by "solid personal achievements", hobbled as it is by low level of technicity and, hence, depends on the combined strength of arms of exceptional individuals to sustain group survival (Irele 126). Then fancy for once if the entire clan, distinguished by war exploits, wrestling feats, and sheer masculinity, is reduced to a rash of *efulefus* (ne'er-do-wells or social parasites)! It actually boggles the mind to imagine Unoka, a great artist and philosopher, remaining largely unflappable and impervious to the opprobrium and odium of a life of failure which – to use the Umuofia yardstick – he sadly embodies and exemplifies. Why is he so completely innocent of either the shame or macho pride for which the Igbo are known? In the course of this paper we shall attempt to provide answers to this particular question, given the strategic significance of the answer to our main task in this investigation.

If Unoka is inured to shame, his son, Okonkwo is the exact opposite, even as his father's miserable and shameful life tends to cast a long dark shadow over his own life. And Chinua Achebe duly informs us that "fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father" (6). Thus, early enough Okonkwo sets about obliterating the huge dark cyclorama (his parental heritage) on which his

own life is naturally projected. If anything, the writer seems to offset admirably Okonkwo's own heroic credentials against his father's life of nullity: Okonkwo defeats Amalinze the cat who had held the wrestling title for a record seven years, thus bringing fame to his clan, Umuofia. He is thenceforth regarded as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages that make up the Umuofia clan; he is also a wealthy farmer, rising from great poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan; a husband of three wives and father to eight children.

Okonkwo is recipient of two traditional titles, thanks to his "inflexible will" to succeed where his father has failed. Additionally, Okonkwo is said to have shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars so much so that he has to his credit five human heads brought back from war. It is this enviable track record of Okonkwo's that makes Achebe open the novel by declaring that: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements" (3). And, the further underscore Okonkwo's greatness, Achebe invariably compares him to the founder of their town who engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights (3). Clearly, Achebe deliberately portrays Okonkwo as a prodigy, the very measure of possibility and the symbolic touchstone of full potential in the traditional Igbo (African) world. Indeed, besides his martial and allied achievements, Okonkwo is drawn as tall and huge, with bushy eyebrows. He breathes heavily and walks as though on springs (3). This impressive self-presence and physicality redound to his fame and greatness in the land. Little wonder, then, we are told that "Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered" (6). In a word, Okonkwo is characterised by the novelist as *the* embodiment and the express image of achievement. Be that as it may, this superstructure of *achievement* is based on a quicksand of sorts:

> But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and the 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 (10).

As earlier highlighted, the Umuofia clan depends largely on values of valour, manliness, and industry; and Okonkwo's father has come to represent for Okonkwo the very image of negation and all that the Igbo culture desperately abhors. Will he, carrying in his veins his father's DNA of utter failure, replicate his father's 'useless' life? That is the genesis of Okonkwo's fear.

Fear is the chink in Okonkwo's armour and his so-called "achievements" are all efforts at papering over the cracks. But does he succeed? Achebe at this juncture introduces into the narrative scheme the story of Ikemefuna: the fear of failure as *hamartia* and his vaulting arrogance of achievement as *hubris*, Ikemefuna comes across as the ultimate test of Okonkwo's claim to greatness. As part of his desire to erase the embarrassing memories of his father, Okonkwo abhors any open display of affection, gentleness and warmth. "Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children" (9). As far as Okonkwo is concerned, anger is the only fit and proper emotion he can deign to openly express; and "anger" being short of "danger" by a letter "d" undercuts Okonkwo's "greatness" or "heroic" stature as he becomes slave to it. During the week of peace, for instance, Okonkwo commits *nso-ani* (abomination) by battering Ojiugo, his youngest wife, for not making his lunch before she goes to plait her hair. Delivering the verdict of Ani, the earth goddess, her priest, Ezeani chides Okonkwo: "… You have committed a great evil … the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" (22). Okonkwo promptly shows compunction and therefore makes amends through performing ritual sacrifices for breaking the sacred peace. And, for a brief spell there is relative peace in his household. Achebe later narrates that, Ekwefi, Okonkwo's second wife, is thoroughly beaten by him for cutting a few banana leaves to wrap

some food (27). Still smarting from her mistreatment, Ekwefi jeers at Okonkwo's amateurish handling of an old rusty gun. Okonkwo promptly takes aim and narrowly misses shooting her to death, thereby nearly desecrating the New Yam festival.

Again, Okonkwo is forewarned – or, *counselled* is a better word – not to bear a hand in the killing of Ikemefuna because "that boy calls you father". Yet, Okonkwo is the person who slays the young boy in spite of the fact that he has stayed in his household for three years, during which time he was fully integrated into the very living fabric of the homestead. Deeply troubled by Okonkwo's crime, Obierika, his closest friend, tells him: "what you have done will not please the Earth" (48) *Things Fall Apart* records that "Okonkwo was not a man of thought, but of action" (48) and "a man of action, a man of war" (7).

It is this bellicosity bottled up inside him which seeks escape through Okonkwo's unintentional manslaughter of Ogbuefi Ezendu's sixteen-year-old son at his father's funeral (86). The tragic *faux pas*, considered as "a female crime" by the Umuofia people, is nonetheless seen as a crime against the earth goddess, a crime punishable by banishment. Okonkwo and his family are exiled in Mbanta, his mother's homeland, for a seven-year period. During this interregnum-like silence between two thunderclaps – Okonkwo changes from denial through despair to resignation and finally resolution. This time around, Achebe introduces a "greater Ikemefuna", that is, the whiteman: accordingly, Ikemefuna is merely a John the Baptist; the real avatars of chaos and disintegration are the British colonialists who demonise the people's cultural practices and knock the bottom off their autochthonous epistemology and cosmogonic myths. And, the whiteman will prove Okonkwo's ultimate undoing, embodying as he does an alternative, indeed diametrically opposed way of life. And, it is this new way of life which captivates Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. According to Irele:

> Over the three years of their companionship in Okonkwo's household, Ikemefuna has come to embody for Nwoye the poetry of the tribal society,

> which is erased for him forever by the young boy's ritual killing, an act against nature in which his father participates. The fate of Ikenefuna, its stark revelation of the grim underside of the tribal ethos, engenders the emptiness in his heart that predisposes Nwoye to Christian conversion. The terms in which his conversion is described make clear the conjunction between social and moral issues as the determining factor. It is not without significance that the conversion itself is presented as an inner drama of sensibility in which a new poetry takes the place of the ancient, fills a spiritual and affective void … (133).

Insofar as Okonkwo stands *in loco parentis* to Ikemefuna for a period of three years, the boy automatically becomes his 'son' – or adopted son and he, the surrogate paterfamilias. The parental obligations sanctioned by tradition ought to have been discharged by Okonkwo towards his charge but he fails to do this. Also, his homicide is considered by the novel's narrator to be "an act against nature", that is to say, it violates cosmic laws and spiritual principles which undergird human social existence. And since the Umuofia authorities, ostensibly acting on the orders of their deity, participate in the killing, the tribal society loses all legitimacy and/or any sense of institutional cogency for Nwoye. Nwoye's loss of faith in his ancestral religion and his conversion to Christianity has been correctly interpreted by Irele as both social and moral issues which at a deeper epistemic level signal "an inner drama of sensibility". Significantly, the singularity of Nwoye's saga signposts the 'demise' of the indigenous worldview and the emergence of an alien but superior epistemic system. Okonkwo is scandalised by Nwoye's conversion and promptly disinherits him. Not even his "wilderness experience" in Mbanta can mitigate Okonkwo's rigid traditionalism and his rugged individualism:

> His life had been ruled by a great passion to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it. Then everything had broken. He had been cast out of his clan like a fish on to a dry, sandy beach, panting. Clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things (92).

Chinua Achebe also notes in his essay '*Chi* in Igbo Cosmology', "that the Igbo postulate the concept of every man as both a unique creation and the work of a unique creator. Which is as

far as individualism and uniqueness can possibly go!" (98). He yet again argues that "fierce egalitarianism' is a "marked feature of Igbo political organisation" (98).

Yet, the individual is not an island to himself; he must ultimately obey communal rules and regulations in his public and private life. According to Achebe:

> The obvious curtailment of a man's power to walk alone and do as he will is provided by another potent force-the will of his community. For whenever Something stands, no matter what, Something Else will stand beside it. No man however great can win judgement against all the people (99).

Okonkwo's tragic (or is it *pathetic*?) fate demonstrates the fact that contrary to the Igbo belief, as encapsulated in the popular proverb: *onye kwe chie ekwe* (when a man says yes, his *chi* affirms), one's *chi*, as noted earlier on, will not *always* support one, especially if one goes beyond the pale of custom or does things inimical to the common good. Like Thomas Hardy's Michael Henchard (*in The Mayor of Casterbridge*), Okonkwo's downfall stems from his flawed character. This is in line with the popular dictum, namely "character is fate". Yet, to what extent Okonkwo's character is a product of *nature* (that is, genetic coding plus his *chi's* role) or that of *nurture* (that is, socio-cultural determinants) or both, remains difficult to say.

In traditional African heroic narrative, we need to emphasise, the hero is not a run-of-the-mill, average man but one in whose veins runs royal human or/and divine blood. Thus, as a member of the nobility, his heroic credentials are further boosted by 'strange' occurrences which must attend his birth, such meteorological events as storms, lightning and thunder or an eclipse of the sun or the moon.

Moreover, his formative years may be very difficult such that he might attract general scorn, pity or even ostracism; but these setbacks would be overcome by the hero through extraordinary force of will and he would gradually blossom into a "behemoth" of a man, consequently inspiring universal respect and awe. And, with his mystical fortifications by his parents and requisite training in warfare, the hero-in-waiting is ready to come into his own.

After serving his term in Mbanta, Okonkwo returns to Umuofia. But we are told that "the clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that it was barely recognizable" (129). The British colonial masters and their Christian missionaries had established a new religion, a new government, schools and trading stores, thereby opening up Umuofia to modern civilisation. Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and accommodation (130) is thrown overboard by his successor, the Reverend James Smith who sees things "in black and white. And black was evil" (130). Things degenerate fast as the Christian community, emboldened by the seemingly superior logic of Christianity and its prosperity in the Evil forest and beyond, overplays its hand and overreaches its bounds as one of their members, Enoch, a native convert, is alleged to have killed a sacred Python and, also goes ahead to disrobe a masked spirit in broad daylight. Church and clan clash as a consequence, and Okonkwo, alongside other elders of the land, is humiliated by the colonial authorities for destroying their church. Okonkwo subsequently kills a messenger of the British authorities and commits suicide. He is finally cast unburied into the Evil forest.

We have so far attempted to map Okonkwo's grace-to-grass, or, to invoke the Aristotelian paradigm, prosperity-to-adversity tragic odyssey, following the novel's narrative plot. At this stage of our interpretive enquiry, we need to reiterate our main task in this paper to problematize the heroic ideal in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. At the earlier part of this paper we set forth the traditional features and characteristics of both the epic hero and the tragic hero in the classical tradition. In fact, having gone through the novel's narrative schemata, we can reasonably assume that Chinua Achebe, given his European-style education as well as his Christian upbringing, must have deliberately or otherwise quarried into western literary tradition and Judeao-Christian hermeneutics. Thus for diegetic purposes, the characterisation of the novel's protagonist, Okonkwo, cannot have been anything but hybrid and composite, melding character traits and heroic elements drawn from profane reality

gleaned within the immediate Igbo (African) universe *and* from far-flung reaches of the sympathetic imagination.

Even so, can Okonkwo be said to have descended from royalty or divine parentage like, say, Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Beowulf, Prometheus or, to cite well-known examples from African orature, Ozidi of the *Izon* (Nigeria) and Sunjata of the epic of the old Mali Empire? Does the world witness meteorological irruptions or cosmic convulsions at his birth, as are common in the heroic narratives of epic heroes? What extraordinary events attend his formative years? Beyond Okonkwo's hulking physiognomy, can he be said to possess strength of mind, good counsel and organisational acumen in mobilising men and materials in dire moments of collective stress? It is true that the epic hero is marked by immodesty and overweening pride. But his intemperateness signifies the valour and greatness of the collectivity, a healthy habit of mind that gives the tribe its distinctive panache and heroic *brio*. Even when the hero's *hauteur* results in death, there is normally an epochalising aftermath attendant upon such eventuality (Okpewho 80-134).

Okonkwo's personality as dramatised in *Things Fall Apart* does not seem to measure up to these specified qualities of an epic hero. His traditional Igbo society and culture set great store by "solid personal achievements" (Okafor, 2006, 88). Thus, the Igbo notion of democratic republicanism encourages an egalitarianism which gives free, unfettered rein to individual self-actualisation.

This entelechial drive is akin to the famed American Dream, an eternally elusive skein of wishful thinking which, to all intents and purposes, has resulted in more colossal deficits in human potential than tangible heroics. Okonkwo is doubly challenged both by social expectation and, more importantly, by his father's failure in life. But Okonkwo seems well suited to this interestingly ambiguous scenario; ambiguous because, on the one hand, he is

born into abject poverty with all its abhorrent corollaries, and, on the other hand, nature more than compensates him with a physique that is complemented with a single-minded, iron-clad determination to achieve greatness. Like Soyinka's Eman of *The Strong Breed,* Okonkwo fulfils himself in utter loneliness. But to reach his goal, Okonkwo, like Oedipus, has to commit parricide, albeit symbolically. Achebe remarks: "He had had no patience with his father" (3). And, since such things as affection, love, gentleness, peaceableness, and warmth remind Okonkwo of his father, he stamps them out of his own life. Accordingly he abuses his wives and children and shows brusqueness and bumptiousness towards others.

Okonkwo is never a warm and likeable character, but an insufferably overbearing personality. To be sure, there is a sense in which Okonkwo's extermination of the "female" qualities of mind – that is, the aforementioned graces – is coterminous with King Oedipus's parricide, a crime which eventually leads to his downfall. For his part, Okonkwo's career in extremism and excess is a direct fallout of his repression of his humane sensibilities. In this regard, he reminds us of classical Greek epic and tragic characters, especially, Achilles. Homer's *Iliad*, it must be recalled, is principally a thematic elaboration of the wrath of Achilles. For good measure, Okonkwo's tragic career is a dark tribute to unconscionable spleen: just as so many Homeric epithets and patronyms are deployed in tricking out Achilles in *Iliad*, so are `such laudatory epithets as "Roaring Flame", "living fire", among others, used in describing Okonkwo. He also brings to mind some historical as well as mythic personages in the African world. Both Thomas Mofolo's novel, *Chaka* and Mazisi Kunene's *The Epic of Emperor Chaka The Zulu* dramatise Chaka's life of violence and mindless bloodlust which ultimately leads to his ignoble end in a lonely desert. Chaka's godless catechism, namely, "mercy devours its owner" (Mofolo, 1942, 47) proves his undoing as he abhors all traces of mercy or humanity. While Chaka was a historical phenomenon, Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and iron, is a figure of myth. Wole Soyinka in *Myth, Literature and the African World*

explores Ogun's penchant for violence and belligerency (see also Adekoya, 2007). For South African blacks, Chaka the Zulu is a culture hero, an empire builder and an archetype of black resistance. For Soyinka and for most Yoruba people, and blacks generally, "Ogun is embodiment of Will, and the will is the paradoxical truth of destructiveness and creativeness in acting man" (Soyinka, 1978, 150).

In one word, Ogun is a hero to many African scholars, not least Wole Soyinka. We, then, cannot deny Okonkwo his heroic stature in Umuofia's rites of being and becoming. If anything, his defeat of Amalinze the Cat in the famous wrestling contest makes Ekwefi, the Village Beauty, run off from her matrimonial home to cohabit with, and later marry, Okonkwo. In symbolic terms, Ekwefi may be regarded as a war trophy with which Okonkwo decorates his treasure chest. Ekwefi is at once Helen of Troy and Rachel the daughter of Laban in the Holy Bible.

Yet Achebe's trademark sense of the ironic is in evidence with regards to the all-important question of motivation. As earlier highlighted, Okonkwo is like a dwarf in a giant's robes *a la Macbeth*. His blind and unreflecting masculinity is sponsolled by FEAR. And there is nothing more despicable and unheroic than fear. The spirit of fear is the ruling passion of a coward, and a coward can never be a hero. By the same token, Okonkwo at various times in *Things Fall Apart* is characterised as the *nza* bird (22), the Agama Lizard, and the Tortoise (Mezu, 2006, 147-164). He is the *nza* bird which exemplifies delusion of grandeur and small-minded self-exhibitionism; the lizard as the self-gratulatory *poseur*; and the tortoise, the over-reacher *par excellence*.

Thus, Okonkwo's destructive atavism and his one-trackminded outlook on life ultimately make him cut the figure of an outlaw-hero. We hardly need to remind ourselves of his series of grave infractions against the tribe's laws, like the accidental killing of a youth, an unfortunate incident which leads to his exile in Mbanta. Moses went through his wilderness

experience in Midian and re-emerged a better and wiser leader; Chaka withdraws from human society and hibernates in a desert for a brief spell. He later rejoins society a changed man. And even Ogun permitted himself a dignified solitude on the summits of Idanre Hills after the tragic slaughter of both friends and foes, no thanks to the fumes of the potent draught. Ogun was the wiser for his confinement. Can we say the same of Okonkwo? Do the humanising imperatives of the female principle which Mbanta epitomises, cut any ice with Okonkwo? Not quite. Unlike Obierika, his friend, who is a man of thought, Okonkwo is relatively thoughtless, impetuous and brash.

Achebe deliberately bruises Okonkwo's inflated ego by first allowing him to glimpse Nwoye's "incipient laziness", and, more decisively, making Nwoye repudiate the tribal culture and its ancestral religion through his conversion to Christianity. A scandalised Okonkwo contemplates this painful development in the solitude of his *Obi*, utterly nonplussed. And, then Achebe delivers the sucker punch: "Living fire begets cold, impotent ash" (109). This proverbialization of the human condition seems to clinch not only the spectacular saga of the Unoka lineage, and by extension, the entire Umuofian clan, but also captures the *dans macabre* of humankind as a whole. Thus, Achebe, the master ironist, makes Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, the very opposite of his father. In fact, Nwoye and his grandfather, Unoka, are birds of a feather, apparently cut from the same cloth. Like King Lear, we might say the wheel has come full circle for Okonkwo. To some extent, therefore, Okonkwo embodies his tribe's accent on sheer force of personality based on the "male" principles of strength, valour, muscularity, bloodthirstiness, aggressiveness and hard work.

Again, Achebe subtly undercuts this through his antithetical portraiture of Unoka, the loafer and merry drone.

According Abiola F. Irele:

> Unoka plays a double role here; not only does his fate and its effect upon his son provide the key to the latter's psychology, he also embodies the counter

> values that stand in opposition to the inflexible social ideal of the tribe. For there is a real sense in which Unoka can be considered a rebel against the rigidities of tribal society. His unorthodox style of living is a conscious subversion of the manly ideal, to which he opposes the values of arts along with a playful irony and an amorality that accords with his relaxed disposition to the world … even his end in the Evil forest constitutes a triumph of sorts, a form of defiance that the narrator emphasizes with this significant detail: "when they carried him away, he took with him his flute" (13). In the end, he attracts the reader's sympathy by his unprepossessing attitude and by a certain humane simplicity, which is associated with his type, for the portrait we have of Unoka is that of a folk hero, whose insouciance stands as a constant rebuke to the vanities of the great and powerful of his world (127-128).

Much has been written on the supernatural element in the making of the traditional epic or ancient Greek tragic hero (Okpewho 105). The hero is either the scion of the gods or a product of a divine-human miscegenation as is Achilles and other heroes in classical literature. Even those who are not so fortunate to have descended from the gods or have divine blood running in their veins, are almost always fortified by their parents with occultic mystical powers in the form of powerful protective charms, amulets, herbal preparations and scarification. With this "insurance policy", to borrow the common Nigerian locution, the hero becomes invincible. At no time in *Things Fall Apart* are we told that Okonkwo is so "fortified". He wins fame through the strength of his arm. Even the Igbo adage, which counsels that "those whose palm-kernels (are) cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble" (19), hardly applies to Okonkwo. According to Achebe: "He had cracked them *himself*" (19. emphasis added). Thus, the assigned role of the *chi* or Okonkwo's personal god remains, to be fair, ambiguous. According to Kalu Ogbaa, the concept of *chi* "is at the root of individualism in Igbo tradition". He then points out that, while *chi* provides a link to the ancestors and grants individuals a certain amount of guidance and protection in life, "*chi* does not help an individual who fails to help himself" (qtd. in Booker 62. See also Achebe, 1975; Clement Okafor, 2006 and Rose Ure Mezu, 2006). To be certain, when Okonkwo is down on his luck and is exiled in Mbanta, Achebe notes: "clearly his personal god or *chi* was not made for great things. A man could not rise beyond the destiny of his *chi*.

The saying of the elders was not true – that if a man said yea his *chi* also affirmed. Here was a man whose *chi* said nay despite his own affirmation" (92).

The relationship between Okonkwo and his *chi*, has been remarked on by critics to the extent that it would be superfluous and idle for us to rehash the highlights of their asseverations. It is, therefore, enough to state that, "the ambiguous relationship of Okonkwo to his personal god, … [illustrates] the grounded insecurity of the human condition …" (Irele 125).

Many critics have argued that Okonkwo's fall occurs not because he embodies the values of his society, but precisely because he deviates from his society's norms of conduct (Booker 253). According Biodun Jeyifo, for instance, Okonkwo is "doomed because of his rigid, artificial understanding – really misrecognition – of his culture" (qtd. in Booker 253). Also, Ravenscroft and Ojinmah argue that the Igbo society depicted by Chinua Achebe is characterised by a careful balance of opposing values (particularly of masculine and feminine principles), while Okonkwo focuses strictly on the masculine side of his personality and thus fails to achieve this balance (Ojinmah 15-16; Ravenscroft qtd. in Booker 253). What these readings suggest, therefore, is that Okonkwo is *not* a *typical* Igbo man, but an aberration marked by irony, ambiguity and paradox. His composite or hybrid constitution works against the kind of universal hero that one would love to see.

The designation of Okonkwo as "hero" by some literary critics and scholars is as a result of flippant, superficial and hasty literalism, a pattern of critical response bred by undifferentiated generalisation. Measured even by the ethical standards of his Umuofia clan, Okonkwo still strikes us as something of a pariah as he tends to swing from one end to the other of the heroism – villainy polarity. This unfortunate state of affairs is due largely to his much-advertised unbending commitment to outworn and anachronistic tribal customs. Judged

also by Marxist paradigms, Okonkwo cannot be said to represent a people's hero, lacking as he does the proletarian hero image.

His meteoric rise to prominence in Umuofia's social affairs as well as his consequent bourgeois upper-crust way of life can be considered a form of class suicide. He becomes a lapsed peasant, a turncoat shaming his plebeian provenance. A man not used to the class and etiquette of high society, Okonkwo's pretensions to gentility jar and rankle. Neither does his image fare better in the hands of feminist critics like Florence Stratton, Carole Boyce Davies, Rose Mezu, Akachi Ezeigbo, among others. Rose Ure Mezu, for example, gives short shrift to Achebe for his construction of the character of Okonkwo in her comparative study entitled, "Achebe's Okonkwo and Hurston's Jody Starks: Two Souls in Different Climes and Their Women" (Mezu, 2006, 147-164).

In fact, it is Achebe's alleged lopsided portrayal of Okonkwo as the linchpin of a demonstrably patriarchal social order which has given rise to the groundswell of feminist denunciation of Achebe's oldest, but timeless novel. Thus, Achebe is thought to have made amends for this "gender injustice" with the central role he assigns Beatrice Okoh, the graceful beautiful intellectual career-woman in his youngest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah.* We might also argue that all along Chinua Achebe has recognised the complementary role of the female in the endless search for the heroic in the great task of nation building in Africa and the developing world.

In this connection, if we are willing to concede that Obierika is Okonkwo's *alter ego,* his female self, who he consults during periods of crisis, Achebe can be said to have been, after all, vindicated. Further, the rehabilitating role of Mbanta – the "city of refuge" for Okonkwo as outlaw or fugitive – this homecoming to the affective watering-hole of therapeutic essences, encapsulated in the Igbo name *Nneka* ("mother is supreme") also vivifies Achebe's subtle feminisation of the heroic ideal. Beatrice Okoh is simply the final

fulfilment of this *engendered* heroism. By the same token, Unoka and Nwoye, though male, are some of her epiphanies.

In our post-modern age, Okonkwo can be said to be way ahead of his time. A compound of contradictions, Okonkwo seems to totalise the antinomic tensions, the self-cancelling moral ambivalences of our time, the shifting ethical standards, the incertitudes and indeterminacies of contemporary times; the decentred ego caught in an endless flux of signifiers – ("the falcon cannot hear the falconer"); the paradox of language and the grand *aporia* called human life and living. Okonkwo, thus, becomes, under this scenario, the victim as hero, or, more accurately, *anti-hero* of the Millerian mould (See *Death of A Salesman*). In the ensuring maelstrom of the "mere anarchy" that is colonial Umuofia at the closing stages of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo turns a driftwood torn asunder in the crosswind of change.

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