



THE SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

*The tragic consequences of the African encounter with European invasion, can be seen as the on surface theme of Chinua Achebe's masterpiece **Things Fall Apart**. But if one delves deep, one can visualise the social as well as the psychological conflict of an individual i.e. Okonkwo, the protagonist. This conflict is created by the incursion of the white man and his culture into the self-contained, self-sufficient world of the Ibo clan. Things Fall Apart as the title suggests is no doubt concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by the advent of the white man. But within this framework is contained the sphere of action which involves the personal drama of the characters themselves.*

INTRODUCTION

The action in the novel is realised through the relationship that exists between Okonkwo, the protagonist and his society. In many ways, Okonkwo represents his society in so far as the society has made the man by proposing him certain values and lines of conduct. On the other hand, the man's personal disposition, his reaction to these social determination arising from his subjective perception of them, prepares his individual fate.

In case of Okonkwo, he is a man who belongs to a community which has faith in the individual quality of manliness. And it is an irony of fate that makes Okonkwo start off with a disadvantage on this score-the failure of his own father Unoka. He has to live down with this shame. It compels him to an excessive adherence to the social code to an extent which transforms a value into a weakness. The real conflict with self begins here.

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Okonkwo never shows any emotion openly unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection is a sign of weakness for him. The only thing worth demonstrating is physical strength. Besides, in order to justify himself, he becomes obsessive with the emotion of anger. However, this soon degenerates into egocentricity. It is very clear that we are in fact dealing with a psychological case. Okonkwo's way of shutting everything else out of his view, aware only of himself, is an indication that his ambition becomes a blinding passion of a pathetic kind. The stage is set in the very mind of the character for a tragic career.

The outside factors add to this tragic movement. As a result of his own mental attitude, Okonkwo's relationship with other people is thrown off balance. His own rigidity towards himself is reflected in his impatience when dealing with others and in particular with his son Nwoye. He wants his son to be manly. The meaning he attaches to 'manliness' amounts to fierceness, violence. This however becomes a menace to his society. On one occasion he breaks a sacred vow by beating his wife in the sacred Week of Peace.

"He was not the man to stop beating someone half way through, not even for the fear of the goddess" 'One of the elders commenting on his actions remarks, 'The evil that 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'.

This utterance comes true when Okonkwo kills a clansman at a funeral (though accidently) and has to go into exile which consequently leads to mental stress not just for him but also for his immediate circle. His exile brings frustration and gives a deep setback to his ambitious life. But Okonkwo is a man who is prepared to grapple with his fate, to bend everything to his irrepressible will. Only at one stage, does he seem to relent.

"Clearly his personal god or Chi was not made for great things. One could not rise beyond the destiny of his Chi. The saying of elders was not true-that if a man said yea, his Chi also confirmed. Here was a man whose Chi said nay despite his own affirmation."

After his return to Umuofia, he encounters new circumstances and challenges. The presence of the white clansman and his success in making the converts makes it difficult for him to relaunch his struggle on a new footing. A personal issue is involved here. The fact that his son Nwoye is among the Christians is only symptomatic of the way in which the new religion strikes at his own heart. He has to use the fight against the Christians to regain his lost position in his village. This is even easier than his inflamed passion. This makes him realise and he is naturally involved in the attack on the church that leads to his arrest and



humiliation. The impact of this incident on Okonkwo's mind prepares the last phase of his tragedy.

"As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards he would go out and revenge himself"

His final action in killing the messenger of the colonial administration is in a sense, his revenge and his final defeat is the utter futility of his action, his final realisation that he has gone so far beyond reasonable limits in championing his society as to have lost touch with it.

"Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umoufia would not go to war. He knew because they had to let the other messengers escape....He heard voices asking, ' Why did he do it?"

Things Fall Apart is the tragedy of one man, worked out of his personal conflicts, his neurosis, his fear of failure especially failure of his own son Nwoye.

The conflict is created out of the gradual breakdown of a normal relationship between the father and the son and Nwoye's final alienation from his father. The final breaking of the filial bond is directly related to the killing of Ikemefuna.

"Nwoye knew that Ikemefuna had been killed and something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow."

But this incident is not confined merely to the simple question of the son's reaction to the father's place in his own life and its consequences upon his sensibility, but it is also related in the same passage to the wider issues of the boy's reaction to his society. Nwoye is presented all along as a sensitive young man whose psychology turns against certain customs of the village, particularly the casting away of twins into the forest. In fact, Nwoye's conversion to Christianity later on, has a double significance, it is at the same time an act of revolt against his father as well as rejection of society that he has embodied. Nwoye, thus stands for the symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all that Okonkwo accepts and stands for. Besides the psychological aspect there is also another dimension to the novel i.e. social aspect. The tragedy is no doubt of Okonkwo but it is also the tragedy of an older order which gets trampled while yielding place to new. Okonkwo's suicide is a gesture that symbolises his personal refusal of a new order. Okonkwo's rigidity, his tragic flaw is a reflection of his society. However, Achebe has also presented the positive side of the society. The intense

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warmth of personal relationship and the passionate energy of the religious life reveals the cohesiveness in the society. Nevertheless, the social conflict is portrayed through the social structure which starts falling apart when the outcasts and the mothers of the unfortunate twins deflect to the new faith. The very thought of liberation or freedom from the traditional custom has a magnetic pull towards the religion of the white man.

Things Fall Apart turns out to present the whole tragic destiny of the Ibo clan. The life of an individual as well as that of the society gives Achebe's novel its real strength. The alienation of the individual, followed by frustration, a frantic attempt to restore the identity and position paves the way for a tragic ending thus depicting the psychological and social conflict in this novel.

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