

YAŞAR UNIVERSITY  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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MASTER THESIS

**VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S  
THINGS FALL APART; A SUBTLE APPROVAL OF THE  
IMPERIALISTS' ATTEMPT TO "OTHERIZE" THE AFRICAN  
SYSTEM AND CULTURE**

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THESIS ADVISOR: ASSIST.PROF.DR. FATMA TÜBA GEYIKLER

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We certify that, as the jury, we have read this thesis and that in our opinion it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

### VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*; A SUBTLE APPROVAL OF THE IMPERIALISTS' ATTEMPT TO "OTHERIZE" THE AFRICAN SYSTEM AND CULTURE.

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MA of Arts, English Language and Literature

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This work will examine how Okonkwo is and presented by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*-a novel written by Chinua Achebe himself in 1958. As I explore these depictions, presentation, and analysis of Okonkwo, I will attempt to examine why Achebe allows his protagonist to go through the many life challenging and transforming events that happen in his life and how these events ultimately become a subtle approval of the Europeans' attempt to colonize the continent of Africa. I will also search out and explore the view of other writers and critics on the character of Okonkwo, the many challenges in the life of Achebe's protagonist, and how it affects the past, present, and future of the entire people of Umuofia, the Igbos and the African continent. To further understand Achebe's unwitting approval of the colonization agenda of the Europeans, I will equally explore the work of Jean-Francois Staszak on the theory of "other/otherness" and its relevance on how the colonizers subdued Umuofia, the entire African system, and culture, and then I will go on to analyze how viewing Okonkwo as the villain endorses such wolfish and malignant imperialist ideas and how it crippled the concept of heroism in Umuofia and the African continent. Though there are more established and influential thinkers and scholars like Derrida and Foucault on the concept of the 'other and othering', this work focuses on the work of Jean-Francois Staszak consequent to the fact that he explores the concept from a perspective that makes it easily relatable to the purpose of this work.

**Key Words:** Villainization, Colonization, Otherness, Othering, Culture, Hero, Heroism, Subtle, Imperialist, Crossroad, Contradictions, Colonialist



## ÖZ

# CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* BAŞLIKLİ ROMANINDA OKONKWO'NUN KÖTÜ KARAKTERE DÖNÜŞTÜRÜLMESİ; EMPERYALİSTLERİN AFRIKA SİSTEM VE KÜLTÜRÜNÜN "ÖTEKİLEŞTİRMESİ"NE ÜSTÜKAPALI BİR ONAY

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Bu çalışma Chinua Achebe'nin 1958 yılında yadığı *Things Fall Apart* (*Parçalanma*) başlıklı romanda Okonkwo'yu nasıl tanımladığı ve karakter olarak nasıl çizdiğini inceler. Sözkonusu tanımlar, karakterin sunuluşu ve analizler gözden geçiriliken, aynı zamanda, Achebe'nin bu karakteri niçin bu yaşam sınavları ve insanı dönüştüren deneyimlerine tabi tuttuğu ve tüm bu mücadelenin, nihayetinde, Avrupa'nın Afrika'yı kolonize etme girişimini alttan alta haklı çıkaran bir onay olarak okunabileceği üzerinde durulacaktır. Çalışma Okonkwo'nun, Achebe'nin bu başkahramanının karşı karşıya kaldığı mücadelelerin, bunların Umuofia'da, yaşayan tüm insanların, Igbo'ların ve hatta tüm Afrika kıtasının geçmişi, bugünü ve geleceğini nasıl etkilediğinin, diğer araştırmacılar ve eleştirmenler tarafından nasıl algılanıp değerlendirildiği üzerinde de duracaktır. Achebe'nin Avrupa'ya ait kolonizasyon ajandasını kasıtlı olmayarak onaylayışını anlayabilmek için "ötekilik" kuramları üzerinde durulacak, bu kuramların Avrupa'nın Umuofia, Afrika kültürel sisteminin tamamı ve kültürünü egemenlik altına almasıyla nasıl ilişkili olduğu ve nihayet, Okonkwo'nun romanda "kötü adam" olarak temsil edilmesinin, yırtıcı ve kötücül emperyalist fikirleri desteklediği, Umuofia'nın ve tüm bir Afrika kıtasının kendine özgü kahramanlık algısının bu şekilde çarpıtılmış olduğu ortaya konacaktır. Konu üzerine daha yaygın kuramları bulunan Derrida ve Foucault gibi düşünürlerin de çalışmaları bulunmakla birlikte bu çalışmanın amacı dâhilinde, bakış açısı nedeniyle Jean-Francois Staszak'ın çalışmaları kullanılmıştır.



**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kötüleřtirme, Sömürgeleřtirme, Öteki, Ötekileřtirme, Kültür, Kahraman, Kahramanlık, Üsütkaalı, Emperyalist, Yolağzı, Zıtlıklar, Sömürgeci.



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Chigozie Michael George.

İzmir, 2020.



## TEXT OF OATH

I declare and honestly confirm that my study titled “Villainization of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; A Subtle Approval of the Imperialists’ Attempt To “Otherize” the African System and Culture” and presented as a Master’s thesis has been without applying to any assistance inconsistent with scientific ethics and traditions. I declare, to the best of my knowledge and belief, that all content and ideas drawn directly or indirectly from external sources are indicated in the text and listed in the list of references.

Chigozie Michael George.

July 29, 2020.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	v
ÖZ .....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	ix
TEXT OF OATH .....	xi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	xiii
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2 ACHEBE’S CROSSROAD AND SUBTLE VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO .....	13
2.1. Achebe’s Place in the world of Literature .....	13
2.2. Achebe, His Mind and the Need for Cultural Bridg.....	15
2.3. A Missed Opportunity .....	17
2.4. Creating the Hero and a Heroic Consciousness.....	19
CHAPTER 3 THE CONCEPT OF VILLIANIZATION AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE COLONIZATION AGENDA OF THE WESTERN WORLD .....	27
3.1. The Industrial Age of Europe and the Colonization of Africa. ....	27
3.2. The Othering of Umuofia, the Igbos and the Continent of Africa .....	33
CHAPTER 4 THE VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO. ....	36
4.1.The Cultural Definitions and Expectation of the Igbo Hero .....	36
4.2.The Hero and the Charlatan.....	39
CONCLUSION.....	58
WORK CITED.....	60

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In recognition of Achebe's works and contribution to African Literature and the literary world, Achebe has been hailed by many as "the founding father of the modern African novel in English" (Jaggi 26). Jaggi's position is echoed by Dennis Abrams who asserts that "when Chinua Achebe died in March, he was mourned around the world, proclaimed as the father of African Literature". Though "Achebe himself repudiated the 'title,' as 'Father of African Literature'"(1). One thing that is certain and obvious to everyone aware of the history of the development of African literature is that Achebe is an important figure that cannot be overlooked when researching works of literature from African authors. "Achebe gained with age the status in Nigeria of a bard and a sage that the modern world rarely affords to writers" and his work *Things Fall Apart*", even at the time of his death remains the best-known work of African literature (Gourevitch1).

First published in 1958, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is easily the most recognizable and widely taught African novel in the US. It has been translated into at least 50 languages and it has sold more than 10 million copies worldwide and has appeared on many 'greatest books of all times' lists around the world. Considering all the accolades and recognitions that Achebe received in his lifetime and his many writings and contribution to African and global literature, Without a doubt, it is fair to say that, Achebe deserves the honor accorded as a literary giant. Though are many other books were written and published by Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966), as well as a collection of his short stories *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Short Stories* (1962), and work for children *Chike and the River* (1966). *Things Fall Apart* was his ground-breaking novel, and the work that one would say brought him worldwide attention and the numerous awards that continued to flow throughout his lifetime. It has since become one of the most widely read books in modern African literature. Ogburn on his part tagged the novel as "the African novelists' novel" (87).

When the novel celebrated its fiftieth year of publication in 2008, Whittaker and Msiska noted that “the literary world will celebrate one of the most remarkable stories in the history of African literature. Few could have predicted the impact and influence that this first novel by an unknown young writer from Nigeria would have when it was first published in 1958” (Whittaker & Msiska 37). Achebe, though late, remains a literary point of reference in Nigeria and beyond, and his novel *Things Fall Apart* continues to draw praise and criticism in Nigeria and indeed globally. *Things Fall Apart* has inspired an enormous amount of critical attention in the five decades since its publication and this critical fascination with the text shows no sign of diminishing” (Whittaker & Msiska 38).

As there are many accolades for Chinua and the literary genius exhibited in *Things Fall Apart*, many questions beckoning for answers all through the novel. As regards this, Andrew Foley says “And yet, despite the novel’s status and the copious critical material which it has inspired, some fundamental questions about the actual meaning of the novel remain unresolved. At the heart of the problem lies the issue of how to interpret the reasons for Okonkwo’s downfall, or, to use a more richly amorphous phrase, his fate. Is his destruction to be seen merely as the result of pure chance – a combination of personal misfortune and the accidents of history – or does the novel suggest a more purposeful explanation? If the latter is the case, is the nature of this explanation primarily psychological, sociological, or even theological?” (40). The question of meaning which Foley asserts remains unresolved throughout the novel is such that one cannot completely agree on what exactly Achebe intends to achieve with his work. There is a portrayal of the precolonial and colonial life, culture, religious belief, and the judicial system of Umuofia and the Igbos by extension. A careful dissecting of how events unfold does not make it easy for a reader to determine what meaning to assign to the novel and what the complete intentions of the author are. Ozun and Baskale assert that Achebe remained one of the foremost African writers to reveal a well-acquitted and realistic account of the African tradition and culture (2). Ozun and Baskale’s statement, therefore, addresses the intention of the author which is to give an account of the African cultural and traditional system from the perspective of the colonized and not the perspective of the colonizer, however, though the former point of Ozun and Baskale’s statement about Achebe should be accepted as considering his contribution to African literature, the later might not completely pass



as true and complete when considering that on many occasions in the novel, there appears to be a subtle negative portrayal of the traditions, culture and the religious life of Umuofia and the Igbo people by extension. This, therefore, takes us back to the question of meaning as raised by Foley and then the question of intention as addressed by Ozun and Baskale. It is obvious that Achebe does not draw much attention to the stable life of Umuofia before the arrival of the colonizers but he appears to elaborate certain aspects of the culture and belief system of Umuofia that did not align with the ways and life of the imperialist. The aspects of Umuofia's culture and tradition that ordinarily should be read as evolving are presented as backward and primitive ways of life crying out for redemption. As Umuofia's ways are painted and portrayed as primitive, there is, therefore, the need to point the people of Umuofia to another way of life that is modern. Hence, the portrayal of the imperialist and their supposed modern and advanced ways of doing things in the most alluring and seductive manner. Foley questions the meaning of the novel, Ozun and Baskale raise the concern about intention but Achebe's lack of hesitation in highlighting the negatives of Umuofia does very little to allay the fears of anyone one that might lean on such premises to believe that there is beneath the surface of *Things Fall Apart* a subtle approval of the activities of the imperialist. Ozun and Baskale assert that "while Achebe presents the positive sides of the Igbo customs and traditions such as palm-wine and kola nut sharing or consulting the elders before starting an unreasoned fight that would disturb the public peace, Achebe also depicts the flaws in the society such as the blind allegiance to the superstitious beliefs including throwing new-born twins into the evil forest or leaving sick people who are in the threshold of death in an isolated forest due to the belief that sickness is an abomination to the earth" (6). He, Achebe does fail to draw attention to the fact that Umuofia's traditions are not static, or devoid of progress. Over the years, the traditions and culture of Umuofia had gone through reformations as we hear from Ogbuefi Ezeudu who tells his visitors that the punishment for breaking the peace is no longer as hard as it was in the past. We learn from their conversation that everyone who broke the Week of Peace in the past was dragged through the rough roads until they gave up the ghost but the punishment was abolished because it had broken the week of peace which it is aimed at preserving (34). Such changes and reformations that had happened to the culture and tradition of Umuofia are evidential to the fact that it is not a static culture in wait for some sort of messiah that will step in and save her people, the contrary, the culture and the people of Umuofia are self-aware of the need

to evolve when it is needful. The sort of attention that Achebe, therefore, draws to the evolving traditions of Umuofia simply makes room for the reader to align with Foley in wondering what meaning and purpose to assign the entire novel.

Narrowing the questions and contradictions around the life of Okonkwo, Whittaker and Msiska assert that “Okonkwo is undoubtedly a heroic figure, yet he is also a tragically flawed individual who comes to symbolize both the supreme embodiment, as well as the internal contradictions, of his culture’s ideals” (Foley 37). There are so many questions arising from Okonkwo as the protagonist of the novel, not only is Okonkwo at the center of the novel in terms of the actions of the novel rising and falling around him, he is also that character that is not only controversial in most of his actions but one that becomes an embodiment of the contradictions throughout the novel. One is left in limbo when thinking of the different and confusing behaviors that Okonkwo displays on different occasions. At some point in a meeting, Okonkwo who we are meant to understand has a dislike for weak and never-do well men is quick to shoot down Osugo, a man he referred to as a woman, and told him to be quiet as the meeting was a meeting for men. When a more elderly man shoots back at Okonkwo by reminding him that “those whose palm-kernel were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble” (Achebe 29), Okonkwo is surprisingly quick to apologize even though Achebe goes on to assert that Okonkwo’s palm-kernels were not cracked for him by a benevolent spirit rather he out of determination had cracked them himself. At some other point also in the story, we also see that Okonkwo, despite how hard he appears to be on the outside, is quick to accept the consequences of his action when he beat his wife during the “week of peace”. We are meant to know that he was very sorry for his actions and shows great repentance by doing even more than what was required for the cleansing of the land. The death of Ikemefuna also presents us with another opportunity to view Okonkwo from another angle different from the angle of him being a hot-tempered man lacking the ability to show passion. Though he participates in the killing of Ikemefuna, he does so only as a messenger of the gods, one who must without hesitation carry out the will of the gods (Achebe 64) and not as a heartless individual who takes pleasure in the killing of an innocent child. The days following the death of Ikemefuna, though he defends his participation in the killing, Okonkwo is heartbroken and unable to get himself together and for two days, he eats nothing, drinks only palm wine and he is also unable to bring

himself to sleep. Okonkwo's emotional state after the death of Ikemefuna is proof that Okonkwo is not a heartless murderer who takes pleasure in killing. At this point, we read Okonkwo in an entirely different light so different from the man that we read from the early part of the story.

These contradictions and many other questions arising from the novel and around the character of Okonkwo contribute to the reasons why many are not exactly sure of how to read Achebe's work regarding the novel's protagonist. These contradictions do not only raise uncertainties concerning how exactly Achebe would like the reader to view his protagonist but they also throw the reader into a state of confusion wondering if Achebe himself is caught the middle of two worlds; the supposed primitive world of Umuofia and the Igbos by extension for which he is part of and the invading the force of the imperialist which appears to hold the keys to his future exposure and success as a writer and literary giant hence the need to dance to the tune of both worlds, therefore, the many contradictions. Hanging on these contradictions and questions of intention around *Things fall Apart*, this work aims to x-ray the diverse and contradictory manners in which Okonkwo is defined and presented to the readers by Achebe and by doing so will attempt to expose a subtle approval of the colonialists' attempt to otherize the African people and their traditional and cultural ways of doing things.

Okonkwo, as a protagonist in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, has been the subject and the center of many written and unwritten academic discourses. He, as the protagonist of the story, broke records while overcoming the extreme poverty of his family to become a great leader within the Umuofia community. Achebe through his narrator informs the reader "that Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father" (Achebe 20). The extreme poverty of his father Unoka did not stop him from desiring greatness, wealth, power, and the recognition for which his father did not have within the community. Speaking of Okonkwo's achievements, Achebe says that everyone from the nine clans of Umuofia and visitors of Umuofia could see from the Okonkwo household that he is well to do. His fenced compound, his obi, the homes of his three wives, all together give a half-moon-like shape behind his obi. The barns of yam remain and the house for his *Chi* remains exceptional and evident of his prosperity. We are made to understand that Okonkwo is not only wealthy in his barns of yam and farm, his wives also continue to prosper in the rearing of their hens (Achebe 18).

Okonkwo not only becomes successful in his family life, but he also goes on to become a respectable man in the entire nine villages of Umuofia. He achieves what many thoughts was quite impossible for his age by defeating his opponent in a wrestling match, in the narrator's words "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 honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino" (Achebe 1). Defeating Amalinze, the cat, propelled Okonkwo to the front role of the famous in Umuofia, and along with his prosperity as a farmer, he became a respectable voice amongst the people of his clan. He became a staunch defender of traditions and culture of the nine villages of Umuofia against internal and external forces including the invading force of the imperialist who attempts to replace the religious practices of Umuofia with their own. Okonkwo is not only willing to kill in defense of the traditions and culture of his people but also willing to die for it. It will not be far from the truth if one argues that Okonkwo eventually became the man standing between the people of Umuofia and the invading force of the imperialists along with their draconic systems that submerged the traditions of Umuofia.

Despite the many achievements of Okonkwo and his strong will to defend the traditions and culture of his people against any form of invading force even unto the point of his death. A good number of scholarly works, critics, and writers have continued to view Okonkwo as a villain due to what they regard as his "hubris" and weaknesses as a protagonist in the novel but a careful analysis of the way Chinua Achebe framed his protagonist and many other critics read him shows a systematic villainization of Okonkwo and by extension reveals that they inadvertently give subtle approval to the Colonialists' perception of the "other" of the African system and culture. Though Achebe declares and maintains that his major reason for writing *Things Fall Apart* was, as he said in *The Paris Review* of 1994, 'if you don't like someone's story, write your own', thus, he dedicates himself to write about a colonial experience from the perspective of the colonized and also to criticize those works written by Europeans including several misrepresentations about Africans (Ozun and Baskale 88), In doing this, Achebe inadvertently plays into the colonizers' script through his portrayal of Okonkwo's character and the events that lead to the falling apart of the nine villages of Umuofia and by extension, the traditional and cultural

lifestyle of not only the Igbo people but the entire African continent. Achebe's intention in his novel is to satisfy the need for an African, a Nigerian, and a person of the Igbo tribe to tell the story of his people and correct the many misrepresentations of his people by European writers. Ozun and Baskale affirm that "Chinua Achebe is one of the significant writers of African culture who in his novels aims to provide an erudite exegesis of the texts and introduce readers to the importance of contextualizing historical and cultural perspectives it defines. His novels not only represent the history and culture of Africa but also serve as a direct response to a whole canon of Eurocentric writings presenting Africans as inhuman savages" (1) but as he attempts to do this he ends up giving his readers and critics reason to question how well his intentions were met without villainizing his protagonist and the tradition and culture he epitomized. "Although *Things Fall Apart* remains the most widely read African novel, the failure of its hero continues to generate haunting questions in the minds of some of its readers, especially among those who seem to identify with the hero's tragedy. Central to this discomfort is the question: why did Achebe choose as his hero an aspiring but brutal young man who ultimately took his own life?" (Nnoromele 146). Though Nnoromele's description of Okonkwo as a "brutal young man" also raises genuine arguments of its own: his general point of view is essential when considering that there is a possibility that Okonkwo is inadvertently villainized by Achebe himself. Achebe begins his novel by highlighting the many great qualities of Okonkwo. He leads the reader into the early life of Okonkwo as the son of a debt-ridden man who could not afford to pay his creditors however he preferred to drink away his sorrows only for them to return when the signs of drunkenness had cleared from his eyes.

The reader is made to get the idea that for Okonkwo to survive he must be everything that his father is not and such a pursuit must come with great sacrifice and the price was the suppression of emotions of love. In the words of Achebe as he spoke about Ikemefuna and how he got along with the Okonkwo upon his arrival to Umuofia, "even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy - inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it is the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness, the only thing worth demonstrating is strength"(Achebe 21). Not only did Achebe allow his protagonist to accomplish his mission of defeating the extreme poverty that ruled his father's life and household with a strong hand, he goes further to become a very respected voice in the entire village of Umuofia and even to

the point of becoming one of the Lords of the nine villages that make Umuofia. The rise of Okonkwo from the very dust of the earth to the mountain top and his sudden plummet back again to dishonor and disrepute is so dramatic and disturbing that readers are prompted to ask why Okonkwo “ who had risen so suddenly from the lamentable state of poverty and misfortune to be one of the lords of the clan” (19) should be dragged through such horror and trepidation in life. Achebe himself acknowledges that he has “been asked this question in one form or another by a certain kind of readers for thirty years” (Lindfors 22). Therefore Achebe adds credence to the fact these contradictions are there and requiring that they be critically x-rayed to ascertain the reasons that could be behind them.

The readers and critics who ask the question of why Achebe allowed his protagonist to rise so high only to experience a sudden fall could, therefore, be said that they acknowledge Achebe’s roles in framing his character to drive home a message. Consequently, there is the need for this work to explore the possibility that Achebe subtly endorses the imperialists’ move and orchestration to otherize the culture of Umuofia by villainizing Okonkwo who stands as an embodiment of the cultural and traditional life of Umuofia and a true defender of all that the people stand for and represent. We see that though Achebe praises Okonkwo in many ways he also associates him with many character flaws and “several commentators have argued that Okonkwo's failure is due to his character weaknesses” (Nnoromele 12). Therefore, it might not be far fetched to argue that the weaknesses that lead to the downfall of Okonkwo might have been as a result of the intentional creations of the author. Though many many literary critics do not subscribe to the idea of exploring the author’s intention when attempting to determine what meaning to assign a text, it is noteworthy to say that for this work, I shall agree with Carrol who “maintains that authorial intentions and biographies are relevant to the interpretation of artworks” (306). Carrol is not alone in this line of thought as we that Dehahoyde while referencing the work of Freud on Psychoanalytic criticism affirms that literary texts, like dreams, express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author, that a literary work is a manifestation of the author's own neuroses (1). Moreover, the events leading to the downfall of Okonkwo are equally aligned in such ways that make it nearly impossible to not explore the author’s intentions for his protagonist. Upon the arrival of Ikemefuna to Umuofia, “the elders of the clan decides that Ikemefuna should be in Okonkwo's

care for a while. But little did they know that it would be as long as three years before anyone would think of what to do about him. They all appeared to forget all about him as soon as they had taken the decision” (Achebe 20). The reader is made to believe that Okonkwo’s position in the community is a major reason why the elders collectively agree that the boy should be kept in his care. Carrol affirms this assumption as he writes that “the guardianship of the boy was a mark of Okonkwo's hard-won status and the highest point of his rise to power” (48). We see that though this is a well-intended move that would ordinarily have cemented Okonkwo’s position as a respected elder statesman in the heart of the Umuofians and readers as well. However, it turns out to become Achebe’s way of laying the groundwork for the transformation of Okonkwo -Umuofia’s hero to a villain who will later descend to the lowest point possible by taking his own life. There are many events in the novel that are quite dreadful and heart-rendering but none could be said to alter the life of Okonkwo as the arrival of Ikemefuna to the family of Okonkwo and the eventual hacking down of Ikemefuna by the machete of Okonkwo. Despite all of these, one cannot overlook the possibility that Okonkwo’s life might have turned out differently if Ikemefuna had not been lodged in his house. David Carrol commenting further on this episode in the novel adds that “the execution of Ikemefuna is the beginning of Okonkwo's decline, for it initiates the series of catastrophes which ended in his death” (49), Patrick Nnoromele on his part adds that “what happened next would be used in the novel partly for the downfall of Okonkwo”( 153).

It is imperative to note that the killing of Ikemefuna was not the problem but the bond of father and son that developed was a major setback. Okonkwo as a man of war is not new to killing and hacking down people with his machete, Umuofia as a whole is not new to it but none of them, not even Okonkwo seemed prepared for the hacking down of a boy from his household and one that he had grown to be very fond of. Referring to this bond, Achebe writes that “sometimes when [Okonkwo] went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father” (Achebe 21). It was because of this father and son bond that Ezeudu approached him when the decision that Ikemefuna should be used as a sacrificial lamb came, he informed Okonkwo of the decision and said to him “ ‘that boy calls you father,’ he had said. ‘Bear no hand in his death.’” (98). It, therefore, becomes obvious

and more evident that Okonkwo is expected to treat Ikemefuna as a member of his family, and by doing so keep in mind that a member of the Umuofia clan does not kill another member of the clan. We read that it is a crime against the earth goddess and the oracles of the land to kill a fellow-clansman, and a man who commits such crime must flee from the land” (100). As we consider the life of Okonkwo before the arrival of Ikemefuna, his time with Okonkwo’s household, his killing, the expectations on the shoulders of Okonkwo as an upholder and defender of traditions, religious practices and the culture of Umuofia one would be forced to ask if it would not be mere sentiments to expect that Okonkwo should not bare a hand in the death of Ikemefuna after all the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves are the ones that made the pronouncement upon the boy (Achebe 44). Further, Okonkwo, as we read, is a member of the custodian of the culture and traditions of the land. Okonkwo’s willingness to obey the decree of the oracle regardless of the consequences that may arise could be likened to the willingness of Abraham of the bible who upon receiving a command from his God does not hesitate but sets off to offer his only son as a burnt sacrifice. (Genesis 22). While there is little or no criticism of Abraham for such a display of commitment to obey the instruction given to him, one can only wonder why Okonkwo is held by a different standard by those who read him as a villain. As a respected member of the Umuofia clan and also in his position as one of the lords of the clan, he must do the biddings of the oracle clan, and to do otherwise is not just seen as a weakness but outright disobedience to the will of the oracle. The death of Ikemefuna is as a result of the instructions of the gods, therefore, one would say that Okonkwo should be not held accountable rather should be read as another proof of his bravery and willingness to uphold the traditions and culture of his people regardless of what might be the cost of his actions eventually. Instead of this and true to the word of Nnomorele, everything that happened after the arrival and death of Ikemefuna is employed to bring about the downfall of Okonkwo. The death of Ikemefuna weighs heavily on the heart and shoulder of Okonkwo to the point that we are told that “Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drinks palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor” ( Achebe 48). The loss of his appetite is not his only sorrow over the death of Ikemefuna, we are equally made to understand that “he did not sleep at night. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him” (48). Okonkwo’s emotional breakdown after the death of



Ikemefuna, therefore, serves to defend and exonerate him from any attempt to portray him as an evil and unprincipled man with a cold heart of stone though we see that there is a further drive and attempt to villainize Okonkwo as we see this in their conversation.

I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy," he asked Obierika.

"Because I did not want to," Obierika replied sharply. "I had something better to do."

"You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle, who said he should die." "I do not. Why should I? But the Oracle did not ask me to carry out its decision. "But someone had to do it. If we were all afraid of blood, it would not be done. And what do you think the Oracle would do then?" "You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed at home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families." "The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger," Okonkwo said. "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm (Achebe 69).

Obierika sees the actions of Okonkwo as abominable, he believes that such actions can provoke the gods to pour out their wrath on the earth. Okonkwo reminds him that he is only a messenger of the gods that are very willing to carry out their instructions to the latter and even to the detriment of his soul and that of his loved ones. Obierika does not see his absence as a form of disobedience to the gods or a form of weakness and an act of cowardice rather he focuses on Okonkwo and villainizes him and his actions. One would say that Achebe permits such villainization of his protagonist because it served well to draft and align events that will eventually leave Okonkwo with the impression that he ultimately failed his community and Ikemefuna who had become the type of son he never biologically was able to have. Achebe leads us to understand that the death of Ikemefuna has contrasting reactions from Okonkwo and his son thereby widening the gap between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Not only did the gap between both widen, but the event also is one of the reasons why Nwoye denied his father and abandoned the worship of the oracle to go after the god introduced by the invading Europeans and colonizers. It is amazingly surprising that while the killing of

Ikemefuna is employed as a tool to paint Okonkwo as a cold heartless father that would put what people think of him above the life of a young boy that calls him father, the foundation of the imperialist religion is laid on the story of a God who willingly sacrificed his only son when he thought it to be the only possible and last option to cleanse the earth of their many atrocities committed against him.

As the story of Okonkwo and Umuofia evolves and things begin to fall apart, we observe that the fall of Okonkwo and Umuofia happen simultaneously with the rise of the harbinger of the imperialist religious belief, judicial system, and culture across Umuofia and the rest of the Igbo in Nigeria. Nnoromele argues that the presence of the invading force of the colonialists throws the entire clans of Umuofia into a situation where they are forced to choose between the attraction of being part of the new wave of civilization and their culture and traditions. He asserts that Okonkwo appears to be the only one who understands that choosing to go with the new wave of modern civilization would come at the price of losing the things that defined the identity and values of Umuofia (147). Okonkwo, as we read through the novel, is the person that always led his people to war and other important negotiations between Umuofia and other clans. His absence from Umuofia when they find themselves in need of direction creates a vacuum as no one fill when it comes to putting up a strong resist and as Nnoromele adds, things ultimately fall apart when some members of the Umuofia clan unwittingly accept the new faith and the new ways of the imperialist (Nnoromele 147).

## CHAPTER 2

### ACHEBE'S CROSSROAD AND SUBTLE VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO

#### 2.1. Achebe's Place in the World of Literature

Achebe's place in the history of African literature is such that he is a forerunner and pathfinder for many literary giants in the continent. As posited by Jaggi, he remains a founding father of what we know to be the modern African novel (26). To further emphasize the influence of Achebe, Larson affirms that throughout the Anglophone and tropical African countries, Achebe remains the most prominent and significant novelist (598). His effort and contribution to the development of African writers and the African novel cannot be overstated, even in his death, Achebe remains a rallying and reference point for writers from the African continent. Extending Achebe's influence beyond the shores of the fifty-eight nations of the African continent, Rowell in his interview with Achebe affirmed to his face that, those who read the twentieth-century world literature consider him to be one of the most important and influential writers of that era (86). True to the words of Rowell, Achebe was not only a literary icon in the African context, he was and remains a well celebrated literary giant even in the western world. Writing on Achebe's recognition and acceptance among the westerners, Ezenwa-Ohaeto confirms that he received several recognitions from different quarters for his contribution to the world of literature and his fight for the African economy. He also asserts that in the year 1989, Achebe was appointed a distinguished professor of English at the City College of the city of New York. In the same year, he was equally given the Callaloo award in recognition of his invaluable contribution to the world of literature. He also confirms that in the same year 1989, in acknowledgment of his work in World literature and serving as a bridge between the cultures of the western world and the that of the African continent, Achebe received the honorary doctoral degree of Human letters by the Westerfield state College, Massachusetts ( Ezenwa- Ohaeto 267). The rate at which Achebe received accolades, recognition, and appointment in the western world means that he was accepted as a

voice worthy of note in the world of literature. In his lifetime, Achebe authored many novels but out of the many novels written by Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* remains the most prominent and widely read of them all and it could be argued that it was this novel that led to his recognition and acceptance as a literary giant. Though published in the year 1958 as the pioneering work of Achebe, the novel which has been translated into more than fifty languages of the World remains Achebe's most highly regarded work to date. Essentially written to "subvert the Western's long tradition of depicting Africans as savage and primitive. His novel not only represents the history and culture of Africa but also serves as a direct response to a whole canon of writings produced by European writers like Joseph Conrad and their refusal to see Africans as fully human"(Ozun and Baskale 88). Clark asserts Achebe believes that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* written in the year 1899 provides and supports the Western world's assumptions that the African continent is far behind Europe and that Europe is civilized while Africans are uncivilized and deeply mysterious in their ways (Clark). *Things Fall Apart*, therefore, was Achebe's way of reeducating people about the true nature and life of the African continent. In her words, Irele asserts that the novel provided an image of African society, reconstituted as a living entity and in its historic circumstance: an image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meanings and values (1). It is obvious that Achebe, in line with his intentions for writing *Things Fall Apart*, quite succeeds in changing the mind of many Westerners and even African about how the continent should be viewed and related to in all aspects. In his biography of Achebe, Ezenwa-Ohaeto tells the story of a German Judge who had planned to relocate to Namibia after retirement but after reading the novel declared himself not so innocent when it comes to his perception of the African continent and her people (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 261).

Throughout the life and times of Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* attracted reviews, praises, and criticism for many reasons and the novel continues to do so even after his death. Many have focused on several aspects of the novel but one aspect that might have received little or no attention is the possibility that Achebe in his attempt to give a vivid, accurate, and balanced account of the life of Umuofia and the Igbos as a people before the arrival of the colonialists unwittingly villainizes Okonkwo and the cultures of the same people who he set out to defend and portray in a brighter light. In the *Paris Review of 1994*, Achebe posited that it is only wise to tell your own story if you do not

like the way the story is told by another person. In line with this thought, Ozun and Baskale, therefore, assert that Achebe “dedicates himself to write about a colonial experience from the perspective of the colonized and also to criticize those works written by Europeans including several misrepresentations about Africans”(88). I will agree with Ozun and Baskale and many other writers who have praised Achebe for using *Things Fall Apart* to retell the African story but another critical look must be given to the way and manner in which Okonkwo, Umuofia, the Igbo, and by extension all of the African continent are equally portrayed in a light that inadvertently approves colonization.

## **2.2. Achebe, His Mind and the Need for Cultural Bridge**

To understand the working of Achebe’s mind while writing *Things Fall Apart*, One should take a closer look at his background and not just the intention to persuade Westerners and the world at large to look at the African continent from a perspective different from that of Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness* novel where he portrays Africans as savages, mysterious and backward people in need of the urgent light and salvation that the Western world had to offer. Ozun and Baskale assert that Achebe and his family were extensively exposed to the culture, language, and religion of the colonizer and as time went by, they all converted and became Christians (Ozun and Baskale 88) and in the *Paris Review* added that his family did not only convert to the colonialist’s religion, his father became an evangelist and religious teacher and together with Achebe’s mother they spent thirty-five years of their life traveling through major parts of the Igbo land promoting the new religion and by extension the culture and lifestyle of the Westerners. It is evident therefore that the life of Achebe’s parents greatly influenced his world. This, therefore, meant that Achebe became a writer intending to explore multiculturalism through his writing and to become a sort of bridge between two worlds. Achebe also grew up in a multicultural and multireligious environment because Nigeria as a country is made up of many different cultures and then there was the culture of the colonialist and his religion. This sort of diversity among his country people possibly drove home the need for a cultural bridge. Despite this, one might not be too far from the truth when positing that Achebe was caught on the crossroad of two worlds and wrote with the consciousness of such multiculturalism in the global sense but never really in the Nigerian diversity of culture. The success of *Things Fall Apart* and other works of Achebe in expressing

and promoting cultural difference could be the reason for the acceptance of Achebe and his works in the Western world. Ezenwa-Oheato while referencing Karen Winkler confirmed that Achebe through his works had become a voice in the western world of literature and therefore deserved recognition in the curriculum of multiculturalism (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 283). Also in the *Paris Review of 1994*, Achebe informed his interviewer that while at the University of Ibadan which was then an affiliate of the University of London, he studied Christian theology and also the Traditional African religion. This therefore further emphasizes the extent to which Achebe was exposed to a multicultural and multi-religious system. He also explained that under the tutelage of his then lecturer from the West he learned to compare both religions and cultures. Such revelation from Achebe, the West's fascination with him and his work, and the numerous awards that followed his works all help us to understand that though Achebe was moved by the need to portray the African continent in a manner different from what other Western writers did in their writings, his work in *Things Fall Apart* was not meant to be critical of the invading colonialist and their new religion. This is even more obvious as we see that he did not also hold much back when pointing out the negative aspect of Umuofia and the Igbo culture by extension. It is clear that Achebe attempts to maintain his objectivity throughout the novel and by doing so he does not give the Igbo culture a free pass while writing about aspects of their culture and traditions that were still evolving. He highlights the weakness of both parties while creating an opportunity for the reader to see that there are many differences and similarities between the religion of the West and that of the African continent. The conversation between Akunna and Mr. Brown (Achebe, 163-164) is one such occasion that gives the reader a better understanding of the fact that Achebe though desiring to portray Umuofia and the whole African continent in a better light was equally interested in using his novel as the bridge between the two worlds. He uses Akunna and Mr. Brown's conversation to tell his readership and the world that there are close similarities between these two worlds that could be explored. Ezenwa-Oheato in his biography of Achebe confirmed that Achebe achieved his desire to become a cultural bridge for the new worlds and that a reminder of such achievement came in the form of the publication *South Asian Response to Chinua Achebe* (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 285).

That Achebe is one of the first and foremost African writers of the continent of Africa to write a novel of such immense acceptance globally raises the possibility that Achebe

might have feared that he and his work might not be truly accepted hence the need to use the novel not only as a work that recreates the African narrative but also as a one that serves as a cultural bridge and by so doing make the work more acceptable. Achebe when asked about the expectations he had for *Things Fall Apart* in its early days declared that since there was little or no work of literature from the African continent hence there was no way to know and ascertain if the work was going to be accepted or even published. There was simply no way to gauge what the response to *Things Fall Apart* would be eventually. ( Bacon 2). In a Washington Post in the year 2008, it was reported that Achebe had equally declared that while working on the book he never really expected the book to be that widely accepted and read globally (Thompson 1). Considering these statements attributed to Achebe, one is left wondering how much such fears and uncertainties concerning the acceptability of *Things Fall Apart* weighed in the heart of Achebe and if such fears and concerns contributed to his desire to give the work its multicultural balance rather than just being a novel that promotes the African culture and tradition.

### **2.3. A Missed Opportunity**

When reacting to a question about the state of leadership in Nigeria during an interview, Achebe spoke about the missed opportunities in Nigeria (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 263) however taking another look at *Things Fall Apart* from the eyes of a twenty-first-century African, one is equally forced to go against the wind of the many praises heaped on Achebe and wonder if Achebe is not guilty of a missed opportunity in the novel. Knowing that his work was the first of its kind to come from an African writer and the African continent as a whole, one would have ordinarily expected that Achebe will use his work as a weapon to equip his fellow Igbo, Nigerian, and the entire African continent with the required mindset to stand up against all forms of colonization and foreign domination. Such expectation will not be out of place as we also see that the belief that the Western world can conquer and colonize other parts of the world like Africa and Asia was promoted through writing (Boyce 392-397). But, It is obvious that Achebe did not feel the need to equip and prepare his people to defend and fight for their land and sovereignty as a nation rather he strongly felt that beyond the need to need to change how the rest of the world viewed the African continent there was equally a stronger a need to bridge the gap between the two worlds even though we see clearly from the conversation of Akunna and Mr. Brown (Achebe 163-164), the

colonizer is not interested in bridging the gap between the two worlds but rather is interested in understanding how he could manipulate his way into the hearts of the people only to eventually colonize and oppress them. Looking at the post-colonial era situation of the African continent, one would only assume that Achebe did not properly understand the working of the mind, thoughts, and intentions of the Westerners when it comes to matters that concern the African continent. Achebe duly accepted that when he wrote *Things Fall Apart*, he was a young man and not an expert when it came to understanding the history of the world. He equally accepted that though he felt he understood the meaning of the story to his people, he did not have a grasp on how the story will fit into a global narrative (Bacon 2). Ezenwa-Ohaeto also confirmed that Achebe got a better understanding of the mind of the Westerners when it came to Africa and other poor nations while attending the 25th anniversary of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and development. While at this meeting Achebe could not stop wondering why he was invited. He was the only writer among the many attendees from the wealthy countries of Europe, Australia, and America and he could equally not comprehend what he was doing among a group of bankers and economist that gathered to promote and propagate their gospel of structural adjustment program; a program that the Western world had forcefully thrust upon the poor countries of the world. It was at some point in this meeting that Achebe understood that to the Westerners, the African continent is not the only a place for colonization but a laboratory where trial and error are allowed (Ezenwa-Ohaeto 267).

After reading *Mister Johnson*, a piece written by Joyce Cary and set in Nigeria, Achebe and his colleagues in the University College Ibadan developed a strong desire to challenge the perception of Nigeria and Africa that was portrayed in the work. Achebe was not hesitant to assert that it was through the reading of *Mister Johnson* that he understood that his home was under an attack (Bacon 1). One would assume that with the understanding that your home is under attack, a strong desire, and passion to challenge the stereotype view and prevailing depiction of Nigeria and the continent of Africa Achebe would use his first novel to do more than just serve as a bridge. An African student reading through *Things Fall Apart* with an eye on the current relationship between Africa and the rest of the world, even after more than sixty years since the publishing of the novel might wonder if Achebe missed an opportunity to define and to set the tone for how the African continent ought to respond against the



domination of the Westerners or any other force that might consider oppressing her people. A critical look throughout the novel also makes one wonder if Achebe could have drafted and used Okonkwo as a rallying voice for the defense of the African heritage instead of allowing him to experience the sort of sudden plummet and fall from grace thereby dragging the rest of Umuofia with him. Before his banishment and exile, Okonkwo remained Umuofia's faithful son, one that was ready to lead the defense line in war and sought to protect the prestige of the clan. When a man of Mbaino killed one of the daughters of Umuofia, it was Okonkwo that led the emissaries of the clan to deliver the message of war or peace. When Umuofia engaged in wrestling competitions, they needed a wrestler who could defeat Amalinze, the cat, a wrestler that had gone seven good years without a defeat. It was Okonkwo who fought and defeated him and brought glory and honor to the land. It was through this victory that the elders of the land remembered the founding fathers of the nine clans of Umuofia and the battles they fought before establishing Umuofia (Achebe 8). When Umuofia went to war, it was Okonkwo that first cut down a human head and that was not even the first time that he brought home a human head from war (15). When they returned with the young Ikemefuna that was given as a peace offering to Umuofia, it is Okonkwo again that is selected to keep him. (14-17). When it was time to carry out the will of the gods and offer Ikemefuna as a sacrifice for the cleansing of the land, Okonkwo though he had grown emotionally attached to the young lad did not hesitate to carry out the will of the Oracles of the Hill and the caves who had passed the pronouncement on the boy. Okonkwo could not be deterred from the desire to obey and carry out the will of the gods despite his friend's advice against getting involved with the death of a boy who had begun to not only call him father but regard him as one (Achebe 56-60). This sort of willingness to go all out in defense of the will of the gods and the reputation of the clan seemed to be the sort of willingness and resilience that the entire clan of Umuofia would have needed when the colonists arrived in Umuofia.

#### **2.4. Creating the Hero and a Heroic Consciousness**

Azuonye while writing about the archetype of heroes in Igbo land asserted that when looking at written literature, one should view it as a source for defining what makes for an Igbo hero: the manner of a hero or failed hero that the writer puts forward for his readership (11). Considering his view, one would, therefore, be moved to argue

that up to the point where Okonkwo is banished out of Umuofia, Achebe had crafted an archetype of a hero that the Umuofians and their generation to come will always look up to when they needed a hero. The exemplary victories of Okonkwo during the war, his rise to prosperity and position in the clan despite being the son of a poor debt-ridden man, his willingness and to submit make amends when found out to be in the wrong, his respect for constituted authority regardless their gender and his willingness to defend the land and people Umuofia irrespective of what it will take all culminate to make him the sort of hero that Umuofia, the Igbos and Africa as a continent will eventually need when the colonists arrive. However, Azuonye goes further to assert that the author should also be considered not just as the creator of a hero but also as the creator of heroic consciousness in the people (11). Azuonye's assertion, therefore, gives us reason to believe that Achebe as the creator of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* was possibly not conscious of the need to also be the creator of a heroic consciousness among his people; therefore, this leads to the toppling of Okonkwo as a hero and his eventual villainization. If one is to accept Azuonye's word that the author is the creator of the hero and heroic consciousness, then one would want to argue that the inadvertent killing of Ezeudu's son, while he was performing the burial rights of his father, could be Achebe's way to usher out the one character and hero that would have strongly posed a strong resistance to his goal of introducing any culture and people to the Umuofians. The event that precedes the day of the burial rites of Ezeudu also culminates to help questions about Achebe's intentions. We see that the night before the burial rites of Ezeudu, Okonkwo had been invited to attend the traditional introduction of the inlaws of Obierika, he and the guest spend the whole day and larger part of the night drinking. Obierika and Okonkwo only get a few hours of sleep before Umuofia is woken up by the sound of the *ekwe* calling for them to gather at the village square. It is at this event that Okonkwo inadvertently kills the son of the dead man (Achebe 110-112). The sequence of occurrence of these two events helps to make the accidental killing of Ezeudu's son almost inevitable as we understand that Okonkwo had drunk much palm wine and had very little sleep. He, therefore, could not be viewed to be in the best frame of mind. Also, bearing in mind that Achebe was later praised for his ability to explore multiculturalism and the need to use his work to serve as a bridge between two worlds, one would further question again if Achebe intends to reduce the resistance that the colonialist will face when they are finally introduced to Umuofia. The departure of Okonkwo and his eventual successful life while in exile

and the atrocities and sacrilege committed by the colonialists with little or zero resistance make one wonder what if the situation would have been any different had Okonkwo been on the ground when the invaders arrived in Umuofia. One is also left to wonder if Achebe missed an opportunity to create heroic conscientiousness in the heart of the people.

Writing on the mind of the author when it comes to how we ought to view a literary piece Azuonye also asserts that literature should be seen as a reflection of an author's mind (11). This, therefore, beckons on us to reexamine the entirety of the novel to ascertain if Achebe's original intention to change the perception of the Westerners about the continent of African was later affected by the need to create a cultural balance and not necessarily to strongly denounce the colonization agenda of the Western world. One also wonders if the need to create a cultural bridge between two cultures was partly the reason why Achebe created a hero whose conscious and unconscious actions will ultimately lead to his banishment from his clan. A hero whose departure and banishment will leave a vacuum in the heart and life of his people. A hero whose people will have no other choice to submit to foreign invasions in his absence. Azuonye notes that, every society will at some point find themselves caught up in a crossroad and that it is at this point that certain characters and personalities are required, he also notes that in such times only the heroic might be able to save that society ( 8). It is obvious that the arrival of the colonialist certainly drags Umuofia to a crossroad that will shape their future but unfortunately the person with the personality and the heroic virtue to save them had been banished thereby leaving them defenseless and helpless. Azuonye further notes that when these times come to society, the people are presented with an intellectual challenge to define what heroism among the people will be and to make plain what the type of person the people are expecting to be their hero (8). Azuonye's assertion, therefore, helps us to understand that the entrance of the colonialist as Christian missionaries into Umuofia and other nations of Africa presents Achebe and other intellectuals among the Igbo people and other parts of Africa an opportunity to rouse the people into an understanding that they need an internal hero to defend them. This was an opportunity to evoke the victories of Okonkwo and the founding father, an opportunity to highlight their sacrifices for the entire village, a chance to emphasize the need to defend the heritage of the ancestors but this opportunity seemingly is passed over. Achebe, therefore, unwittingly leads

the people of Umuofia and the reader to understand that Okonkwo and his likes are therefore not the heroes that we need.

Reading through the life of Okonkwo, the life of the people of Umuofia, and the other neighboring clans surrounding them in the novel, one would notice that there is punishment for every offense committed in the land and no one, great or small is exempted from this. The justice system is such that everyone eventually faces the consequences of their action regardless of their positions within the community. When Okonkwo breaks the week of peace by beating his wife, he is duly reprimanded and he pays heavily for his crime against the gods (Achebe 32-33). When a man from Mbaino kills a daughter of Umuofia, he equally pays heavily for his crime (15-17). When Okonkwo inadvertently kills the young son of Ezeudu, his house is burnt down while he and his family are banished to his mother's village for seven years (115-116). We see that Achebe uses these to establish the fact that Umuofia just like every other Igbo community has an established justice system that helps maintain peace and order in the land and he also employs a character like Obierika to question the justice system thereby creating a perfect balance within the community. After the banishment of Okonkwo, we read Obierika asking himself why someone should be made to suffer and go through what Okonkwo and his family were going through for an offense he had committed unknowingly? Despite how hard he thinks about it, his mind could not grasp the answers, but he is thrown into more confusion about everything even more so as he remembers his wife's twin children who had committed no crime but were thrown into the evil forest. (Achebe 116). Achebe reveals that Umuofia and the Igbo have established a system for correction and he employs his characters to emphasize the system of the checks and balances throughout the novel. However, one thing Achebe does not do is to equally employ any of his characters to question and provide a strong challenge to the many atrocities and abominable acts committed by the colonizers as they ravaged through the villages. We see that the colonialist upon their arrival to Umuofia and other villages established their courts, judged cases in ignorance, and threw even titled chiefs into prison (159). They carry out a genocide on the people of Abame, wiping out an entire village (160). Inspired by the arrival of Mr. Smith, a new convert desecrates and defiles the oracle by unmasking the sacred Egwugwu (169). Despite all of these, at no point do we read of a strong condemnation for these atrocities or some form punishment as we see for the crimes committed by

Okonkwo and others. In their work reviewing the crimes and punishments recorded in *Things Fall Apart*, Dada and Olurotimi make a list of the crimes committed in the novel chapter after chapter and then goes on to also make a list of the punishment served to the offenders ( 2). However, one thing that they fail to make mention of are the crimes committed by the colonialists and just like Achebe, it appears that only the crimes committed by Okonkwo and other members of the clan deserved to be seen as a crime deserving punishment. Turning the other way and refusing to call out the colonialist for their crime or employing a character in the novel to do so obviously leads a contemporary, 21<sup>st</sup>-century post-colonial reader to see a subtle and unwitting villainization of Okonkwo and the people of Umuofia and also a subtle approval of colonization by Achebe.

As Obierika, a member of the Umuofia clan is aware of the need for the culture and tradition of his people to evolve, Achebe does not allow the reader the pleasure of encountering one colonialist character who is aware of the need for his people to think twice of their barbaric and inhumane actions meted out against the people of every village they stepped their foot into. They all appear to be obvious of the terrible atrocities they perpetrate on the people. They also appear to believe that their actions and inactions are what is best for the villages they set their foot upon. While writing on how a hero is toppled and the consequences of such on his people, in the case of O.J Simpson versus the people, Du Bious asserted that the case was not just focused on the fallen O.j Simpson but also on the consequences of the outcome of the trial on African-American. He believed that should O.J Simpson win the case because he could afford the best lawyers and defense attorneys in the country, many poor African-American defendants will be prosecuted and jailed simply to compensate for the general belief that O.J Simpson had gotten away with his crime (63). Thinking through the lens of such an assertion, It appears therefore that Achebe might not have been aware that the rise and sudden fall of Okonkwo would affect not only Okonkwo but also the entire villages and clans of Umuofia and those far off. Therefore by refusing to create a character and that will strongly condemn the actions of the colonialist means he is inadvertently giving them a node to continue to trample upon the culture, justice system, and the entire ways of the people of Umuofia and the entire African continent without due consideration of the after-effects and impact of the life of the generations to come. Okonkwo upon his return attempts to spring up as a voice that will lead the

people to reclaim their heritage and place but appears to be late, he had become nothing but a weakened voice that had lost all its grace and power to rally the people back to actions. It is again at this point that we should reckon with the words of Azuonye who asserts that the author should be the creator of not just the hero but the creator of the heroic consciousness (11). The hero of Umuofia had been made weak and the heroic consciousness of the people that he once represented traded for the desire to have a cultural understanding with the colonialist who only needs to understand the people is so that he can find an easier way for subduing and colonizing them. Achebe would not say that he is completely ignorant of this as we read Obierika in his conversation with Okonkwo make it clear that the colonialist is very clever because he appears to come peaceably with his religion. He gets the Umuofians amused, they in their desire to be open-hearted allows him to stay. The imperialist ends up winning some Umuofia brothers to his side, meaning that they lost the ability to present a united front when the need arose. Obierika ends up confirming to Okonkwo that the invading force of the Western world put a knife to what held the entire clans of Umuofia together and things had fallen apart (Achebe 161). The colonialists' desire and cleverness for understanding how to subtly achieve their goal is anchored on the thoughts articulated by Rubert Boyce that asserts there was an urgent need for the twentieth century Brits to understand that they could colonize the entire globe and to do this, they need to understand that neither the climate, the health condition and the different ways of the West Africans could stand on their way. They simply needed to understand them to conquer them (392-397). It would appear therefore that at the time of writing his first novel, Achebe as a young man and writer was not very acquainted with the real intentions of the Western world in Africa. As Ozun and Baskale rightly observed, *Things Fall Apart* was written at the time that colonization was falling apart in Africa (90). If Achebe had the faintest of ideas of the real intention behind the promises and projects of the colonizer masquerading as missionary men and women all over Africa, one would have expected that leveraging on the fact that colonization was falling apart, Achebe as a writer would take the opportunity of his novel to strengthen the rise and fight against all forms of colonization including economic and financial colonization but instead, we see that the moment that could have heralded a new age of heroism and catapult Okonkwo to another level of heroism amongst his people eventually led to his death by suicide. The imprisonment of Okonkwo and other notable men of the village after they were tricked by the district commissioner to honor an invitation to settle a

dispute, the shaving of the heads with razor blades, and the arm twisting of the entire village of Umuofia to collect two hundred bags of cowries for the bailing of their respected men who had committed no crime (Achebe 175-179) were all nerve-racking events that threatened the collective peace and existence of Umuofia. Their anger was therefore justified but the lack of will to stand and defend themselves is quite hard to comprehend. One is forced again to question why Achebe allows the crown jewel of his novel to die a shameful death and why he allows a people known for their exploits in a war to be so weakened that they could not rally to defend themselves when the need arose. Azuonye, however, gives a hint of what might be a good response to these question as he asserts that “the inborn potentiality to project the heroic image, has, in the Igbo case, been redirected under the pressure of colonialism and religious conversion” (13), looking at the family background of Achebe, one would not find it easy to agree with Azuonye that under the weight of the effects of colonialism and the religion that his parent had spent thirty years of their life propagating it was hard to see him raise a hero that will topple the progenitors' such religion. Ordinarily, the events of the prison and others around it should have presented the author with another opportunity to empower his protagonist and project him as the hero that will lead Umuofia and indeed the Igbo race to triumph over the invading forces of colonization. A closer look into the events of the entire novel will help one understand that Okonkwo’s call for full-blown war on the invaders and colonialists is such that even the oracle and gods of the land will not disapprove. We know that Umuofia will never go to war unless the oracle of the Hills and Caves are in full support and this present case calls for war, just like the war that threatened to start between the people of Mbaino is nothing but a just one (Achebe 16). Also as Louise Maunsell Field posited in his article, it is a war that makes a hero, and Okonkwo and the people of Umuofia were masters of war. Obierika’s attempt to rally Umuofia to go to war in the defence of their land through oratory appears good but late as we see that they and the world around them standstill when Okonkwo cuts down the head of a messenger who had come to stop the clan’s town hall meeting. Since Azuonye asserts that it is partly an intellectual duty to create a heroic consciousness and define what accounts for heroism among the people, we see that Okonkwo’s eventual death by suicide becomes another subtle attempt to portray him as a failed hero and the type of hero that the Igbo child must not desire to be if he or she did not desire that his or her body be buried by strangers and his or her death termed an abomination. (Achebe 188). It also

inadvertently posits that the colonialist and their entourage must not be challenged but must be understood and accommodated.

Writing about the tripartite nature of the hero, Ford noted in his work *The Hero with an African Face* that a hero has to take a journey away from his community and walk into an unknown area where he has an encounter with some form of mystical force, he overcomes it before finally returning home (18). Considering Ford's assertion about the three-fold movement and life of a hero, Harris notes that Okonkwo's journey and life share a similar structure with the hero described by Ford. If we are then to accept this, one would expect that Okonkwo's return should have provided Achebe with an opportunity to finally extol and elevate Okonkwo as the rallying voice for heroic consciousness among the Umuofians and every other clan around them. As Harris rightly noted in *Okonkwo in Exile: Lesson from the Underworld*, Okonkwo's strength as man, his pride and aggressive nature combined all make for what prepares someone to attain the status of hero but Achebe allows these to become instruments of destruction for the one and only person among the Umuofians that had the boldness and courage to stand in defense of the land regardless of the consequences.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE CONCEPT OF OTHERNESS AND ITS RELEVANCE IN THE COLONIZATION PROJECT OF THE WESTERN WORLD IN *THINGS FALL APART*

#### 3.1. The Industrial Age of Europe and the Colonization of Africa

The term colonization refers to the total or partial subjugation of a group of people or an empire by another group of people or empire. It is also “the direct and overall domination of one country by another based on state power being in the hands of a foreign power (For example, the direct and overall domination of Nigeria by Britain between 1900-1960)” (Nwankwo 46). The rise of colonization coincided with the industrial revolution across the empires of Europe who had relied greatly on their slaves acquired via the slave trade for most of their production. As the industrial revolution widened across Europe and the economy grew, there was the need for expansion into the territories of other nations. It was indeed “the quest for the investment of the accumulated capital and the need for raw materials that led to the colonization of Africa” (Ocheni & Nwankwo). On the need of the western world during the period of the industrial revolution, Chinweizu asserts that “when Europe pioneered industrial capitalism, her demands upon the resources of the world increased tremendously (35). This, therefore, meant the colonization of the colonies that were imagined as primitive, ignorant, and backward became a major preoccupation of the western world during the age of industrial revolution. Many parts of Europe and America were economically booming hence the need for expansion. In European nations, the shortage of food for its fast-growing population had become a challenge (Ocheni and Nwankwo 46) This also gave room for the exploitation of the colonies of African. In plain and simple terms, all of Europe and the western world were in search of new frontiers that would sustain the new age they had propelled themselves into. So as the western empires continued to rise, their need and desire to sustain their rapid growth and to provide for their citizens continued to rise along with it. Though through

the slave trade, the Europeans got cheap manpower from Africa to work on many areas that powered their industrial revolution. They worked on their fields and equally served as maids in their houses. When the boom that came along with the age of industrialization meant that they needed additional manpower and additional raw materials. However, the abolition of the slave trade and its concomitant effects on European business trade in Africa meant that the Europeans and indeed the British Empire needed to come up with newer gimmicks and legitimate ways to carry out their business and project of exploitation in Nigeria and other parts of Africa in a legitimate manner (Ezeogidi 2). They needed to come up with ways to conquer these colonies and put them to work as slaves on their land and territory. They needed Africans to be enslaved in Africa, to dig the mines and natural resources for onward transfer to European territories (Nwankwo 47). This attempt and the search for a new frontier that will serve as the supplier for the raw material that will drive the industrial revolution without breaking the law or against involvement in the slave trade is culminated in the birth of another illegitimate process by the name of colonization.

Consequent to the purpose that it was meant to serve, the colonization agenda, therefore, became both “a practice and a worldview. As a practice, it involves the domination of a society by settlers from a different society. As a worldview, colonialism is a truly global expansion of West European capitalism that survived until well after the collapse of most colonial empires. (Borocz & Sarkar 1). The idea that other colonies could be subdued and exploited took the center stage of the mind of many European nations. Political domination and the creation of a legitimate way to exploit these colonies stuck out as the major reasons for embarking on the colonization project (Nwankwo 46). It was at this point that a scramble for the continent of African. As a result of the number of European nations lined up to pounce on the goldmines and natural resources of this continent, there was a need to partition the colonies to create protectorates that would make it easy for colonization. Though the Europeans had very little knowledge of how the people of the African continent operated or lived their lives, for political and economic reasons that benefited them, they simply divided the continent into some sort of arbitrary boundaries from the comfort of their capital cities (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou 1802) thereby giving themselves the ample opportunity to colonize without being at the throat of each other.

As the imperialists begin their project aimed at the colonizing and exploiting the continent of Africa, it soon became apparent to them that these regions like the Umuofians of the Igbo groups, empires like the Benin Empire and so many others in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, had an established system of trade and were self-governed with a distinct sense of true worth and identity. It was also clear to them that “they also maintained good intergroup relations: exchange of trade, intermarriages, and cultural affiliations, especially during festivals. Sometimes, they found themselves disagreeing on some issues which usually led to conflict, conflict management, and conflict resolution. The people had their government, economic system, religious system, and social organization perfectly working in line with their culture and tradition” (Ezeogidi 1). This, therefore, presented the west with a problem: a group of people with such functional systems will not be easily subdued and colonized without a form of organized resistance. The invading empires’ attempt to subdue, dominate and colonize empires that were already in existence and independent were not without resistance, they were heavily stood against as we see with the case of King Pepple of the then Bony kingdom who rallied against the imperialist and their attempt to encroach into his kingdom. (Ezeogidi 5). This led to wars between the invaders and the indigenes. Colonization, therefore, involved killings in a manner akin to “what later came to be decried as Nazi violence within Europe, on non-European populations overseas” (Borocz & Sarkar 1). Though Umuofia did not experience such a form of genocide before falling apart, we see that Abame like many other tribes and empires were completely wiped out by the invading forces of the colonizers (Achebe 126) simply for attempting to defend their land and their people.

The toll of war and the loss it meted on the invading forces meant that the colonization and exploitation project of the Western world which aimed at enriching the west at the expense of the rest of the world needed to be repackaged in a manner that would be more appealing to the targeted empires, therefore, reducing resistance. The imperialists, therefore, moved into their proposed colonies with the pretense that they had come to link the supposed backward and primitive societies like Umuofia to the modern and industrialized world of the west. Included in their planned package for their proposed new colonies was the construction of roads and seaports and the opening of schools and educational systems. We see this also in the colonization process of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, the missionaries set up schools to teach their

language and religion. (Achebe 141) and in the town of Umaru where they established their trade system (Achebe 159). It is apparent however that all of these were done simply to establish a system that will aid “the unleashing of economic, legal, and logistical mechanisms that would ensure the transfer of natural resources from the colony to the metropole (e.g. deposits of minerals, most prominently silver and gold, plus, along with industrialization in Western Europe and North America, other metals such as iron ore)”(Borocz & Sarkar 2). As we see in the case of Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart*, the establishment of the schools helped the imperialist to train indigenes that helped further the goal of establishing and solidifying the systems that powered the exploitation of Umuofia and the rest of the world that they desired to subjugate and colonize.

Though the idea of colonization was masked and disguised as an attempt to reach the supposed primitive and ignorant race with advancement and industrialization. It soon became clear to the indigenes that behind the masquerade of advancement and industrialization was the ploy to politically and economically subdue them and colonize the people. It was clear to monarchs like King Pepple (Ezeogidi 5) and others across Nigeria that the British and the western world was motivated by a need to colonize and exploit lands to sustain the industrial revolution that was happening across Europe and the entire western world. This realization further made it harder to colonize and exploit these regions. This realization also meant therefore that “there was the need for the colonialist to take direct control of the African economy and political administration to reorganize the economy and the markets to make it possible for integration into the world market and international economy” (Ocheni & Nwankwo 47-48). The imperialists soon realized that their ploy to take control of the economic and political control would be difficult to truly achieve without taking control of other areas such as the religious and traditional life of the people because almost all areas of the Igbo life and culture were intertwined around these two areas. Writing on how connected the different areas of the Igbo culture and life are to each other, Nwoye asserts that when it comes to the religious world view of the Igbo people, the key areas of their life like land, agriculture, fertility, moral values even blessing are said to be their female deities (Nwoye, 309). Affirming Nwoye’s position on how intertwined every aspect of the Igbo culture especially around their religious belief system, Mackenzie asserts that the first time the religious belief of Umuofia is mentioned in

*Things Fall Apart*, it is mentioned when speaking about the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves and its stronghold on the people and how the oracles determine the path and direction of the clan in all aspect and the need to obey it (129). Though the colonialist through their messenger branding as missionary attempt to convince Umuofia that the gods are nothing but powerless wood (Achebe 163). We see elsewhere in the story that the gods are not as powerless as Mr. Brown makes them appear. We also read that a group of people who have recently taken refuge in Umuofia recounts the story of how the oracle had been consulted in the town about the presence of some strangers who were the colonialists in the community. The Oracle rightly exposed the heinous agenda of the stranger. The oracle equally and correctly predicted that the first man they saw was a herald to the incoming flood of a locust that will spread destruction in the whole community (Achebe 127). To the justification of the people's faith and adherence to their directives, the whole town of Abame is wiped out and the few that escaped left to tell the tale of how right and accurate the words of the oracles are. Umuofia is not an exception to how intertwined the lives of the people are around their traditional and religious belief system. When a daughter of Mbaino was killed by a man from Mbaino, the people of Umuofia only brazed up for war because they knew that their dreaded Agadi-nwayi would approve their involvement in a war if and only if was a just war and any war against the killing of their daughter is a just one. Despite being certain that the war was a just war they still had to follow the procedure laid down by the gods or they will incur wrath on themselves (Achebe 17).

The intertwined nature of almost every aspect of the life of Igbo communities like Umuofia was not only the challenge ahead of the colonialist invaders. In all communities of Igbo land, men like Okonkwo carried out the will of the oracle to the latter and without hesitation and consideration of the consequences. All that mattered was that the gods have decreed what has to be done. The strong commitment and attachment to the oracle among the Igbo communities were such that it is passed from generation to generation. The will of the gods was supreme in all the land and every member of each small and great clan was bound by absolute obedience to do what was decreed by the gods. Positions within the society, wealth, and fame amongst the people never made any man above the will of the gods. Regardless of what level of achievement and wealth a person had acquired for himself, he or she was never above the representatives of the deities and oracles of Umuofia. We see for example that

though Okonkwo is highly respected and held in high esteem among the people of Umuofia, the moment he unintentionally killed a sixteen-year-old boy during the burial rites of his late father, the law of the land took its full course on the events that followed and to the imperialist, this was a huge stumbling block that needed to be dealt with alongside the problem of how to disintegrate various aspects of the life of the people that were intertwined. The adherence to culture and religion among the Igbo is so powerful and strong that even while in the diaspora, the Igbos did not abandon the worship of their oracles. They constantly were engaged in performing masquerade dances which were a way of worshipping their oracle and god. They also made holes in the cabin where they lived as slaves and used these holes as places of worship of their deities and reverence to their ancestors (Chambers 165). It is therefore obvious such people would not be easily swayed from their religious and traditional attachment. Adding to how attached the Igbos were to their religious and cultural practices, Douglas Chambers asserts that the “eighteenth-century slave sites in Virginia often yielded cowrie shells, and one includes pewter spoon handles incised with designs evocative of Igbo divination tools” (165). We see the same adherence to the deities and the oracle when Okonkwo is banished to Mbanta after he inadvertently kills the sixteen-year-old boy who alongside his half-brother was performing the last traditional dance for their deceased father (Achebe 119). Okonkwo is well received in Mbanta by his Uncle, Uchendu, his children, and the other men of Mbanta. Okonkwo receives a plot of land to build a house for himself and his family, he also receives two other plots of land for farming. Okonkwo displays his adherence and commitment to the gods as he quickly installs his god and the symbols of reverence to his ancestors (119). Okonkwo’s display and installment of his god when he finished the construction of his new house in Mbanta is reminiscent of the sort of keen attention and show of adherence that the Igbo displayed while in slavery. In reaction to this, Mbefo observes that though the early missionaries arrived and settled among the Igbo people, they tried to persuade them against the worship of their gods by threatening that if they did not convert to Christianity and receive baptism, they will burn in hell after their death. The Igbo people were not moved. On the contrary, they preferred to burn in hell with their gods, and ancestors rather be separated from in the event of their demise (Mbefo 40).

### **3.2. The Othering of the Umuofia, the Igbos, and the Continent of Africa**

Upon the realization that the institutions of Umuofia and the entire Igbo communities stood tall above the wish and will of any single man's desire, the colonialists further began employing a more subtle means to carry out their draconic project. The sort of resistance that continued to ensue also impressed it harder upon them that the wars and killings were going to be eventually bad for business. As we see that Mr. Brown after spending some time with the people of Umuofia and understanding their commitment and willingness to defend their culture, he concluded that a direct attack would not succeed (Achebe 164). It is at this juncture that the imperialists began the process of "othering" the institutions of Umuofia and the Igbo.

The process of othering involved creating systems of differentiation. A system where some are whole and complete while another group is seen as incomplete. It is a process that affirms the superiority assumed by a group of people that view themselves as the self and the inferiority placed upon as the other (Staszak 1). This process allows a particular group to relate with themselves as perfect and complete while attributing the qualities of imperfection to another group of people. It is also a procedure that allows humanity to be divided into two groups- the group that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued and another that is defined by its fault, devalued and susceptible to discrimination (Staszak 1). This process involves that the colonialist regards themselves as that group with a valued and faultless identity while the people of Umuofia or any member of the communities of Umuofia as the "other" group with a faulty tradition and culture. Such categorization, therefore, meant that the colonists began creating criteria for including and excluding people. When creating the other within a society, interactivity in and outside that community revolves around some form of codes, standards, and sets of rules that help define and set the tone for who is to be included and who is to be excluded within that community (Kastoryano 79). Through this process and boundaries that emphasize the differences between the included and the excluded, codes that determine who is an insider and who is an outsider are formulated. Staszak further asserts that during the era of colonization only dominant groups such as the Westerners were in a position to impose rules and codes that determined who was included and who was excluded (Staszak 1). According to Staszak's thoughts, this, therefore, meant that as long as the Westerners were concerned, anyone who they deemed different from them or anyone who stood against

them was deemed the other. In the case of Umuofia and other colonized groups in Africa and other parts of the world, the process of creating the other is more than just drafting codes and regulations that determined interaction and those included or excluded. It “involved the destruction of the social, legal, political, protoindustrial, agrarian, and other technological structures of the colonized society” (Borocz & Sarkar 2). The creation of the other and destruction of the institutions that held Umuofia together was not done through violence, but rather through the subtle employment of such tools like the educational, religious, and judicial systems that they had already in existence within Umuofia and other communities where they were established and where there none, they began to do so. The conversation between Mr. Brown and Akunna revealed the subtle tricks and tactics employed for making the institutions of Umuofia appear to be weak. Though Akunna attempts to draw Mr. Brown’s attention to the obvious similarities between the religious beliefs of Umuofia and that of his home country, Mr. Brown, on the contrary, refuses to see any of such differences. He does not wish to entertain the thoughts that there might be a similarity of any sort. Mr. Brown tells Akunna that there is only one supreme God that made the heavens and the earth, Akunna agrees and tells him that the Igbos equally believe so and call Him Chukwu. Akunna goes further to tell Mr. Brown that that same supreme God made the other small gods, but Mr. Brown disagrees. Akunna attempts to explain to Mr. Brown that just as he is a messenger to the head of the church in his home country, the small gods are messengers to Chukwu. Despite the obvious similarities that Akunna points out, Mr. Brown continues his attempt to paint the gods of Umuofia as the evil other of his god. He refers to the gods of Umuofia as false gods of pieces of wood. According to Staszak, the process of othering includes the process of setting hierarchical orders within the society, and through this conversation, we see that Mr. Brown is setting his god as above all while the gods of Umuofia as far below. It is also through this conversation that he better understood that a more direct attack on the religious practices of Umuofia will yield little or no result. Confronted with this sudden realization he began to build schools and hospitals (Achebe 164) that will bring about more subtle ways to do the same thing.

This process became expedient not only because a frontal attack will not work but also because as long as the colonialist was concerned it is impossible for both systems to cohabit and operate alongside each other and the colonialist had no plan to play second



in line to the supposed primitive people of Umuofia and their cultural and religious beliefs. There was a need to make one appear good while the other is made to appear evil and undesirable. This meant that the colonists treated every system of Umuofia and other colonies they desired to colonize as a system beneath theirs, systems that did not meet the requirement to be acknowledged whole and complete. Borocz and Sarkar writing on the colonization of Africa affirm that there was a “continuous and systematic framing of colonized populations as the backward, inferior, dehumanized “other” of the enlightened European/White ‘self,’ and the use of the discourse of scientific racism to this end” (1). The destruction of the political, social, legal, and religious structures of their host societies meant the presentation of colonial structures with the systems that are better and advanced. In Umuofia, Mr. Brown as the missionary became a major tool for this as he went from house to house requesting that every family send their children to him for education and by this education, they meant a less confrontational way that achieves the same purpose of political and economic domination. This also meant that they had devised a less aggressive system that would be employed to extol the systems of the western world while demeaning the very systems and institutions that had governed the life of the people for ages.

As the two societies cannot co-exist, there is bound to be constant clashes as we see in Umuofia when the missionaries clash with the Ekwugwu after one of the converts had committed a great abomination by unmasking Ekwugwu (Achebe 169-173). Affirming the inevitability of a clash in a situation where a group of people views themselves as authentic and whole while the other group as spurious, incomplete, and lacking in many ways, Staszak writes that “the cohabitation of the other and the self in a common space is not given. On the one hand, the discriminatory policies towards the other are more difficult to implement if the populations are intermixed. On the other hand, their cohabitation makes it risky to maintain the particularities (real/imagined) and the stereotypes that distinguish the self from the other” (5). At this point, to abandon the project of colonization would be tantamount to failure which the colonists could not stand. Therefore, such a group that imagines themselves as the “self” while Umuofia is the imagined as the “other”, and there was only one solution to the question of cohabitation, every aspect of Umuofia had to be submerged, subverted defamed, and villainized for the people to consider their supposedly ideal way.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE VILLAINIZATION OF OKONKWO

#### 3.1. The Cultural Definitions and Expectations of the Igbo Hero.

Those who villainize Okonkwo clearly show a lack of understanding of the background and culture of the society of the Igbo people in the Eastern part of Nigeria which is the geographical setting of the novel. *“Things Fall Apart* is not a novel without a cultural context. It is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The characters and their actions are better understood when they are examined in that light. To do otherwise not only denies the novel and its characters a full measure of appreciation, but it also renders vague and imprecise the significance of certain events, actions, and actors in the story” (Nnoromele 147). The reading, comprehension, and full appreciation of a character, a hero, or protagonist in a novel requires that the reader, the critic, the interpreter, or the author understand what cultural demands are placed upon each character and each hero. Azuonye and Nwoga assert that all “through the millennia, every human community is bound to have developed some key concepts on which they operate” (8). It is the and within the confines of these concepts that the actions of everyone within a given society is weighed and Umuofia is not an exception. Azuonye further adds that “the Igbo as a part of humanity partake fully in the capacity to project the archetypal heroic image onto their men of distinction, and recent investigations of Igbo oral traditions reveal an almost inexhaustible wealth of heroic narratives in every autonomous community” (22). It should, therefore, be upon a proper and thorough examination of such concepts, traditions, and a character’s geographical and cultural backgrounds and other factors that define the life and actions of everyone within his given community that one can be in a good position to define a character as a hero or villain. If we will attempt to understand Okonkwo as a hero of Umuofia and the Igbos as a whole and not a hero or villain by western definitions and standards, one must then make a judicious effort to understand the cultural and traditional demands placed upon him and how he responds

to these demands. Zsolt Keczer et.al asserts that “the concept of heroism is shaped by a larger cultural and historical contexts as well” (2). A hero or a villain in a literary work, therefore, does not solely operate on his own rather he operates on certain expectations that are set consciously or unconsciously by the prevailing culture and traditions around him, and Okonkwo as a character is not an exception to the rule and standard. The Umuofia community and the Igbo community by extension have their expectations and demands that a person desiring to be a hero must meet and even exceed before he or she could be regarded as one. Keczer et. el asserts that it possible that social groups within the same culture have different heroes. if this is possible within the same culture, then it should certainly be possible that Umuofia and the Igbos as a distinct group of people have their hero according to their standards and expectations without considering what defines the heroes of other cultures. It is with this at the back of our minds as readers that we should read Okonkwo. It is through the mirror of the culture and traditions of Umuofia that we should consider the way and manner in which we interpret Okonkwo as a character in *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo should not be held to the standards that define the hero of other societies and tradition of which is strange and alien to him rather he should be weighed and examined on the scales of the culture and tradition of his people, the Umuofians and by extension the Igbos.

The Umuofians have their definition of greatness and criteria for whoever is deserving of heroic respect. It is therefore imperative that Okonkwo is considered in the light of these definitions, expectations, and standards. In respect to this, Achebe writes fortunately for Okonkwo, in the nine clans of Umuofia, it is not the worth of man’s father that determines how he is judged in the community, but it is a man’s achievement and accomplishments that set his worth. Achebe adds that though from a poor background, Okonkwo cut himself out for great things. As a young man he wins fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages, becomes a wealthy farmer with two barns full of yams, and even goes on to marry the third wife. These seem not enough, he sets the bar even higher and does the impossible by the standards of his father and many men in the nine clans of Umuofia by taking two titles. He displays incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And all of these he accomplishes as a young man, making him one of the greatest men of his time. “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could

eat with kings” (Achebe 12). Though in other traditions and cultures these achievements might not be what determines who gets a heroic recognition, to the Umuofians, they were the strong prerequisite for anyone who wishes to be considered or treated as one. By the standards of Umuofia and the Igbos as a whole, the rise of Okonkwo from the very dust of poverty to the peak of prosperity and honor in almost every area of his life serve as proof that he is a man worthy of emulation. Writing on the parentage of an Igbo hero, Azuonye asserts that “the ancestry or parentage of the typical Igbo hero is usually remarkable or extraordinary. In the great majority of cases, he is the child of a pauper who rises to eminence either through the discovery of a hidden inner potential or through the assistance of a supernatural helper”(26). In Okonkwo’s case, we see a character who perfectly fits into Azuonye’s description of an Igbo hero because unlike many other young men of his time who were leveraged upon the wealth or good name of their father, “Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit”(Achebe 20). Not only was there no barn to inherit, but Okonkwo’s father also had no good name amongst his people as we are told that Okonkwo “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” (Achebe 18). Okonkwo has the world stacked up against him from the start of life. As a child, he was mocked for his father’s laziness, his father’s image in the community gave him little or no ray of hope to go up the ladder of the society. We see also that even with the gods, Unoka, Okonkwo’s father had a poor reputation that would not earn his children any form of leverage. During his lifetime, Unoka had consulted Chika, the priestess of the gods to know why his harvest had been so poor all year long but to his amazement, the priestess rebukes him without hesitation when she informs him that he, Unoka is popular all over the clan for his laziness. He is known for not properly clearing his farmland when others are committed to cultivating their land and getting it ready for planting. The priestess is also quick to call Unoka’s attention to the fact that his clan’s men travel across seven rivers to cultivate their farmlands while he simply relies on sacrifices to gods for a good and bountiful harvest (21). Indeed we see that before the gods or people of his clan, Okonkwo’s father, Unoka had no good name and left no inheritance that would serve as a good foundation for Okonkwo to build upon. To, therefore, ride on the wings of nothing and attain what he, Okonkwo attains in life, will doubtlessly give him a

name in the books of Umuofia's history and indeed a place among the heroes of the Igbo land.

Despite Okonkwo's family's disadvantages, his father's laziness and aversion to war, Achebe starts the story with a clear illustration of the exemplary and heroic qualities of Okonkwo. In regards to these qualities, he says "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 honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat"( Achebe 7). According to Achebe's account here, we see that Okonkwo did not only bring honor to himself and his father's house, he equally brings honor to the entire villages of Umuofia villages. In Umuofia and the Igbo people as a whole, a man that will seek to be regarded as a hero is expected to not only secure his name amongst the respected people of the clan but he must also secure the respect for his clan and village. According to Azuonye, "a hero is essentially a man who applies his superior endowments to the defense of the security and honor of his people in a time of crisis" (21). On the bases of such expectations and prerequisites, Okonkwo again scores high as we see that through his bravery and skill as a fighter he defeats Amalinze to the delight and glory of Umuofia, his father's house, and himself.

#### **4.2. The Hero and The Charlatan**

Discussing the opposite of what and who a hero is among the Igbo people, Azuonye and Nwoga assert that the opposite of a hero is a charlatan and that whatever the charlatan does is in his interest and not for the interest of the community and the people. His actions are simply motivated by the need for self-aggrandizement and never for the upliftment and well being of the society. The actions of the charlatan are simply inspired and sustained by the sense of his power and worth ( 8). Considering the actions of Okonkwo through the lines of what Azuonye and Nwoga have said and the fact that though Okonkwo aspired to become everything that his father was not and he rightly did achieve them but most importantly with every one of his achievements he equally brought honor and glory to the people of Umuofia. Azuonye and Nwoga continue in their description of a charlatan and adds that "the charlatan misleads a community into acknowledging a kind of prominence which is not valid or useful to the community"( 8). This addition to the definition of who the charlatan is among the Igbo people is the complete opposite of who Okonkwo is among the Umuofians and

the Igbos in general. We see that he leads the community in the path that furthers their respect and honor in the eyes of their neighboring community. He is always victorious in wars. We are informed that during one of Umuofia's wars, he was the first man to cut down a human head and that was his fifth in many wars that brought glory and honor to his clan (Achebe 15). When a man from Mbaino kills a daughter of Umuofia, the elders and the people of Umuofia decide that they will send a message to them, the message is the choice between peace and war. Should they choose the path of Peace, they will have to offer the sacrifice of a son and a daughter to serve as a replacement for the man whose wife had been killed (Achebe 7-10). Though Umuofia is feared greatly by other clans, delivering such a message to Mbaino requires that Umuofia select a man whose reputation equals the weight of the message and that means, doubtlessly that Okonkwo becomes that man entrusted with the task. Okonkwo does not hesitate to answer the call of Umuofia, he delivers the message and gets the expected answer from Mbaino. This means that Umuofia and Mbaino can avoid war. In the light of who the charlatan is among the Igbos, one would therefore not read Okonkwo as a charlatan but as a hero since he is ready to go all out to respond to the call of his people and always succeeds in bringing glory to them thus leading them to the path of greatness as a son and respected warrior.

The hero among the Igbos is expected to be able to dig deep into his abilities to accomplish the task that is before him and the community. He is also expected to surmount the mountain of obstacles before him and his community. Azuonye and Nwoga write that "anyone who wishes to be acknowledged a hero must maintain a continuous string of personal achievements for the benefit of the society to maintain his place as a hero in the eyes of his people; otherwise the individual concerned would lose the heroic status"(Azuonye and Nwoga 15). This is what Okonkwo manages to do throughout his lifetime. At an early age and with little or no external motivation from his father or other members of his family and no yam seeds to plant, Okonkwo reaches within himself, finding the self-motivation to conquer the challenges before him. From conquering the challenge of poverty to becoming one of the respected men in the clan he allows nothing to stand in his way. It is out of Okonkwo's determination to succeed that he comes up with the idea of going to Nwakibie, a respected and wealthy man who had huge barns, married to as many as nine wives and his wives had given him thirty children. Okonkwo's visit to Nwakibie becomes fruitful as Nwakibie

attest to Okonkwo's hard work and gives him four hundred yam seed for the land he had cleared (Achebe 25). In buttressing Okonkwo's strong push to break the limitations that his childhood put before him and his life, Achebe writes that though Okonkwo eventually becomes the man he desires to become, the journey to such level is nothing but painful and very slow, he worked as if he was taken over by a spirit which pushed him to work hard(Achebe 22).

In the case of Okonkwo's banishment from Umuofia to Mbanta, the village of his mother, though he leaves in a haste, he takes only the things he and his family could carry along while leaving behind the things they could not carry. He set out with his family to start life afresh. Through the help of his maternal uncle, Okonkwo is quick to pick himself up and beat the odds against him again to become prosperous even in the land of Mbanta (Achebe 115-131). Upon his return to Umuofia after his banishment to his maternal home, Okonkwo is presented with a whole new pack of challenges including the changes that had been created by the missionaries in his absence. To begin with, he must tackle the challenge of rebuilding his compound from scratch and then fight to reclaim his position among his people because in Umuofia such places were quickly filled by another man once the occupant was absent for even a lesser number of years that Okonkwo spends in mother's village. The worst of the challenges being that the ocean of many events that takes place while he was in exile which erodes his achievements and the attention of the people of Umuofia appears to be drawn away to other more recent events. Okonkwo is no longer the man in the spotlight and Umuofia is no longer the same as in the time past but he is determined to turn things around as soon as he is able and in a position to do so (Achebe 133-136). The rebuilding of his compound does not take as much time as one would expect because Okonkwo begins his plan for this even while in exile. He achieves what many will regard as almost impossible and gradually begins reclaiming his position among the men of Umuofia. And by sheer determination and strong will, Okonkwo is always able to look into himself and finds the power to surmount the challenges before him at every stage of his life. Looking through the Igbo literature in its traditional and modern form to investigate and determine whether types of heroism available to them is crafted in such a way that they can inspire the Igbo future generation, Azuonye and Nwoga assert that such "exercise in self-exploration is supposed to provide the Igbo and their neighbors with an understanding of what heroism means to the Igbo people and what

kinds of heroes they can expect” (9). In respect to Azuonye and Nwoga's investigation, it is obvious that Okonkwo through this same process of “self-exploration” can achieve what seems impossible in his life. He successfully does this and equally lays the groundwork for what every son and daughter of Igbo should expect when thinking of who a hero is and what is expected of a hero from Umuofia and any Igbo community. Through his achievements and victories, Okonkwo also gives the Umuofians and all Igbos a proper tool for self-exploration when seeking to achieve the impossible to attain the position of a hero within an Igbo community.

Through the defeat of Amalinze in a battle, we see that Okonkwo rewrites the history of Umuofia, evokes the memory of the feats only achieved by the ancestors. Azuonye asserts that a hero of the Igbo land not only manages to navigate through the difficulties of his life to become great and bring glory and honor to his people, through his actions, the people are also able to draw comparisons between the deeds of the man and the deeds of the “gods, spirits and other supernatural beings as well as to the forces of nature - wind, water, thunder, lightning, rock, etc” (26). We see that true to the words of Azuonye, the elders and people of Umuofia compare the victory of Okonkwo over Amalinze to the victory of the founder of the seven clans of Umuofia over a wild spirit (Achebe 7).

Through his victory over Amalinze, his conquest, and victories in during wars, he also positions himself as a grandmaster in wrestling and wars. The fight between him and Amalinze is regarded by even the old men as the fiercest since the founder of the clans of Umuofia engaged a spirit of the wild in a seven days battle (Achebe 7). Umuofia and the Igbo as a community have a strong reverence and allegiance to the founders of their clans and the feats they achieved to establish their village and communities as separate entities. The Igbo people also regard founders and fathers of their various communities as masters. They regard them as masters of war, masters of hunting, and masters of many other areas of the Igbo land. This then means that anyone seeking to be a hero among the Igbo people and indeed Umuofia is expected to achieve mastery in a particular area of life or many areas of life as the founders did achieve mastery. By so doing the individual seeking the position of a hero thus evokes the memories of the founders when his name and his deeds are mentioned. Okonkwo's fight and victory over Amalinze and his subsequent conquest whenever Umuofia was at war allowed him to become the definition of what a hero in the real sense of its definition



in the Igbo a language is: a master or a brave warrior. The Igbo word that translates into heroism or hero which comes to mind at this point is the word *dike* which simply means the master of strength, or a brave warrior (Azuonye & Nwoga 9). Strength and bravery without a doubt are the hallmarks of the founder of Umuofia as we see that in the process of establishing Umuofia, he by himself conquers a wild spirit in a battle that lasted seven days (Achebe 7) and before the arrival of Okonkwo to the battlefield, no other battle or wrestling had been viewed as fierce as the founder's battle with the wild spirit. At this point, it becomes clear that it is not the young and old of Umuofia only that has taken note of the person Okonkwo has become, even the wild spirits and the gods of Umuofia have begun to pay attention to their son, as a result, his victory over Amalinze, the cat can evoke the memory of the founder and the difficulty of the task that lay before him as he attempted to found and establish Umuofia. Not only has Okonkwo broken out of the enclaves of his father's failure and poverty, but he also defeats every warrior of his time and surpassed those before him and begins walking in the footsteps of the founder of the nine villages of Umuofia who overcame a spirit of the wild in seven days and seven nights battle. Such a feat is not ordinary and for Okonkwo to achieve it means that by the standards and culture of Umuofia, Okonkwo is in the position of a man worthy of every heroic accolade and should, therefore, be read as a hero and not a villain.

The reference to the defeat of "the spirit of the wild" by the founding father while narrating the glory and honor that Okonkwo brings to Umuofia as he defeats Amalinze-the cat appears to be a possible missing pointer to the future life and duty of Okonkwo by many who read Okonkwo's active fight and participation when defending the culture and tradition of Umuofia. Azuonye asserts that the frame of the Igbo hero is not just that he is a fighter, warrior, hunter, or *dike* that positions himself to defend his people against all forces, they are also the ones that defend the ancestral heritage of the land, they bring honor through wars that they fight in a faraway land, and they are the ones that able to stage resistance at different levels against every form of foreign invasion and domination (Azuonye 24). In the light of this description posited by Azuonye and the many events of Okonkwo's life, one might argue that in Okonkwo, the spirits of the founding fathers Umuofia see a man that would uphold their heritage and legacy at all cost. Okonkwo's defeat of Amalinze, the cat, his victory over poverty, his prosperity even while in exile, and his eagerness to rally his people

against the imperialist's invasion of Umuofia all together epitomize and define the hero among the Igbo people. If the founding father of Umuofia founded the nine clans of Umuofia through a duel then one might also see that the defeat of Amalinze is a pointer to the possibility that the spirits of the founding fathers had chosen Okonkwo as a key custodian of the culture and tradition of the people. This is also evident when we see "that was why Okonkwo had been Chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agreed to give up a young man and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife" (Achebe 30). The other villages feared Umuofia and it might not be far-fetched to add that Okonkwo is one of the men who provoke fear in the hearts of the enemies of Umuofia through his conquest in wrestling and battlefield. Upon the arrival of Okonkwo and his fellow emissaries to Ikemefuna's father's house, we see that Okonkwo is giving a kingly treatment because of his reputation and that of the Umuofians. The elders of the clans of Umuofia decides that Okonkwo should represent them because they are sure that if there is any one person that could provoke the fear of the founding fathers of Umuofia and her people in the heart of their enemies it is no other person but Okonkwo, by so doing they confirm Okonkwo as a worthy custodian of the Umuofia's culture and traditions and a true hero of the land. The effect of Okonkwo's fame and personality is such that there is no discussion and questioning when they arrive at Ikemefuna's village and truly as Achebe himself put it "Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (Achebe 8) so much that even other villages feel the fear as he enters their village. The villagers are quick to hand over Ikemefuna and a young virgin to atone for the killing of Udo's wife.

The arrival of Ikemefuna ordinarily should lead to a little confusion as to where he should stay until decision words come from the gods but the elders are all in agreement to hand him over to Okonkwo with a calm assurance that he is more than able to care for him. The confidence of the elders and the even the gods that Okonkwo can uphold their culture and take care good care of Ikemefuna is such that they all lose track of time and forget Ikemefuna in Okonkwo's house for three years until the gods finally instruct that he should be sacrificed.

Those who criticize Okonkwo or villainize him for his role in the death of Ikemefuna do so with disregard for the cultural background and demands put on Okonkwo and the people of Umuofia who held tight to the cultural and spiritual beliefs in their chi

or god. As Patrick Nnoromele puts it *Things Fall Apart* is not a novel without a cultural context. It is a text rooted in the social customs, traditions, and cultural milieu of a people. The characters and their actions are better understood when they are examined in that light. To do otherwise not only denies the novel a full measure of appreciation, but it also renders vague and imprecise the significance of certain events, actions, and actors in the story (Achebe 147). To the Umuofians, the voice of the gods was the final voice in any matter, and to disregard it and the instructions conveyed came with grave consequences. We know that Umuofia avoids wars that the voice of the oracle was against and only fought the wars that were sanctioned by the oracle of the hills and caves. If they went on to fight a war that the gods disapproved of, they were met with great consequences and loss (17). This is how strong the Umuofians held to their gods and their instructions. It is therefore imperative and necessitated upon Okonkwo that he uphold and carry out the instructions of the oracle even if it meant sacrificing the life of Ikemefuna who had begun to love and regard as a son as we see that on a couple of occasions when Okonkwo went for some big village meetings or communal ancestral celebrations, he would often take Ikemefuna with him and such occasions, he treats him as a son. He allowed the boy to carry his stool and his goatskin bag. Not only did he treat the boy as his son, but the boy also called father (Achebe 31). To Umuofia and truly to Okonkwo, the will and instruction of the gods supersede the emotional and sentimental attachment that one might attach to anything or anyone that belongs to him or his house. The gods are supreme in all things, their will and pronouncements are final in affairs among the people. The power of the gods over the people of Umuofia and Okonkwo's willingness to allow the gods to have their way is further shown when Chielo, the priestess of the gods comes for Ezinma. Their conversation proves that for Okonkwo, the will of the gods stood tall ahead of his will and desire, that though he is a hero among the people and member of the lords of the clan, as long as the gods are concerned, he is still a mortal man that can not stand to question to the will and desires of the gods. As Chielo announces that Agbala wants to see Ezinma, he pleads with Chielo, the priestess, to return at a later time as the young girl is fast asleep. He does not act like the Okonkwo that is portrayed as aggressive, bold, and fearless in the face of whatever comes his way. Though Chielo, the priestess ignores him and goes for the child, Okonkwo unexpectedly is not infuriated by her actions even as Chielo raises his voice at him to the hearing of Okonkwo's wives and children. The Okonkwo presented to us before this point is expected to defend his pride

and personhood in front of his entire household but he does not count the actions of Chielo as insulting or degrading for a man of his pedigree in the community but reacts as an everyday ordinary citizen should submissively react when confronted by the messenger of the gods. Though Okonkwo loves his daughter Ezinma so much, he is willing to allow the priestess to step into his house and take her back to the shrine of the gods without any struggle. Such is the strength of Okonkwo's faith in the gods, the culture and traditions of Umuofia (Achebe 96). Okonkwo's willingness to put aside his love and attachments to Ikemefuna and carry out the instruction of the oracle of the hills and the caves also proves that he is a true hero of his people that will not withhold anything back when called upon to do all the biddings of the gods even if it meant killing the boy himself. Okonkwo cannot understand why his friend who has little attachment to Ikemefuna refuses to participate in carrying out the instruction of the gods. We read through their conversation that Okonkwo is not a man to question the will of the gods. We equally understand that he finds it difficult of coming to terms with why Obierika does not take part in Ikemefuna's killing even though it is the will and pronouncement of the gods of the land. Obierika's declaration that he had other more pressing and important things to attend to equally appear to be more confusing as he makes it sound like obeying the gods is a matter of choice. His position on the matter also pushes Okonkwo to further question if Obierika questions the authority and the decision of the oracle. In response to Okonkwo, Obierika says that though the gods have declared that Ikemefuna is killed, they did not however allow him to carry out the killing, therefore he is not obliged to participate in the killing. The back and forth argument ends with Okonkwo defending his participation in the killing of Ikemefuna by saying that the gods will not punish or curse him simply because he is nothing but a loyal servant that is willing and ready to carry out the biddings of the gods regardless of the consequences (Achebe 69). This conversation shows clearly that Okonkwo is a true son of the Umuofia land and a firm believer in the will and instruction of the oracles. He does not only participate in the killing of Ikemefuna, but he also goes further to call out his friend and questions his decision to not participate in the killing. Okonkwo through such acts further reveals himself as a true and worthy custodian of the traditions, culture, laws of the Umuofia land, and the will of their gods. He further defends his action by reminding Obierika that they are only messengers meant to carry out the will of the oracle. In such a position, Okonkwo understands that and other members of the clan must act without thoughts on the

consequences of obeying the gods but on the consequences of not obeying. It is obvious that while Oberieka does not question the will of the gods to have Ikemefuna offered as a sacrificial lamb, he questions Okonkwo's participation because of his close son-like relationship with the boy.

Okonkwo indeed is a man of few words and yes he has his fair share of indignation, resentment, and anger but considering his childhood and the life of his father one would be too critical to hold them against him. We read that his father, Unoka, the grown-up, is a total failure in almost everything he does, extremely broke at all times, his wife and children rarely had enough to eat. He was a laughing stock in the community. Always indebted and not to one person but many, never having enough to pay back his debt to people hence they refused to loan him any more money but he always found a way to borrow more, and in the end, he piles up debts (Achebe 10). Not only is he regarded as a loafer and failure, but it was also said that "Unoka was never happy when it came to war. He was, in fact, a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (Achebe 11). For Okonkwo, it must have been tough to grow up in a community where age is respected but achievement was revered only to be known and regarded as the son of a loafer, coward, and debtor. Surely this is enough to provoke anger and resentment towards his father. Unoka in the novel becomes Okonkwo's character foil as we see that his weaknesses help the Okonkwo develop the characteristics that will finally make him who he will become. Unoka as a character foil also helps the reader more aware of the stark difference between Okonkwo and his father. It also helps the reader understand that the anger and resentment that Okonkwo felt were born out of the determination to conquer and defeat everything that held his father back from achieving success and a good reputation within the nine villages of Umuofia and the determination to make sure that his children and household do not suffer the same fate he suffered growing up. It is worth noting that Okonkwo though he felt ashamed for the way his father lived his life and the manner of his death and was always on the edge when any proverbs alluding to weakness and underachievement were mentioned (Achebe 24). Okonkwo never feels or expresses hatred or anger towards his father or anyone, rather his anger, resentment, and hatred are for everything that his father had loved such as his idleness and gentleness (Achebe 9) and any sign of weaknesses that might lead to failure. This was simply for the fear that he or the person involved might end up like his father, Unoka.

Okonkwo is said to have a wave of fiery anger but one could easily argue that he channeled his anger towards his work. His anger and hatred for everything that his father was provoked him to work harder than the other young men of his age. Okonkwo's anger and temper, therefore, should not be treated as a weakness rather it should be viewed as one of the main factors responsible for his success as a man, father of his household, a warlord, and hero of Umuofia. We see that though Okonkwo "had been cast of his clan like an onto a dry beach, panting" (Achebe 121) and he had lost everything that he had worked his whole life, he only fell to temporary despair and was troubled immensely by the things that had befallen him yet he harbored no hatred or anger for anyone in Umuofia, he duly accepts his fate. When rallied back to life by his uncle, Uchendu, Okonkwo simply channels any ill feelings in him into rebuilding his life in Mbanta, his mother village while planning for his return to a new life and better life in Umuofia after the expiration of the seven years of exile. As Okonkwo's time in Mbanta runs towards its expiration, there is a clear show that once again Achebe reveals how well Okonkwo has managed to channel his anger into rebuilding his life rather than wasting it on anyone or the situation that led him to where he is. Okonkwo invites all his mother's kinsmen to show more appreciation than they expected, he gives them more than a big feast (Achebe 154) as a sign of gratitude and shows that he has prospered greatly while he lived amongst them.

It is imperative to also consider that his anger is not such that it could not be kept in check as Morrison in his words confirms that his aggressive "instincts are held in check by moderating voices among his fellows" and the rules that governed the nine villages of Umuofia ( ). Rhoads adds also that "the tribes have institutions to control the anger of its men" (65). We also see that Okonkwo is rebuked for calling a man a woman simply because he was less successful, he is willing and quick to offer apologies (Achebe 29). He is also willing to pay the price when he allows his anger to get the better of him during the week of peace when he beat up Ojiugo, his wife, and by so doing committed a grave sin against the goddess of the earth and fathers of the land. The visit of Ezeani, the chief priest of the earth goddess reveals this part of Okonkwo that has received little or no attention. He is quick to feel remorse when he has broken the law and when he is rebuked. Achebe confirms that Okonkwo obeys the priest and does all that he is instructed to do and even more as we see that he also takes palm wine along with him. Though inside of him he was repentant, he is not the type of man

to go round the community declaring his wrong. Consequent to this, people always believe that they act disrespectfully towards the gods. Those who despised him argued that the blessings of the gods upon him had gotten to his head. Many of them refer to him as the little bird *nza* that challenged his chi after a heavy meal (Achebe 33). Okonkwo, though he does not go around showing his remorsefulness for the breaking the week of peace, he is internally very repentant and does not hesitate to do what is required of him for the cleansing of the land. This therefore further informs us that Okonkwo's anger is not much of a problem as long as he remained a man loyal to the biddings of the gods, the goddess of Umuofia, and the eyes of the elderly men that were readily available to voice their dissatisfaction when he crossed the threshold of normalcy. Okonkwo's anger served as a lever to accomplish all that he accomplished for his life, family, and community at large.

The killing of one of the five court messengers by Okonkwo remains a major climax in the story that sums up the role and responsibility of Okonkwo as the last defender of the culture and tradition of the Umuofians. The whole village of Umuofia is enraged by the invasion and degradation that their elders and people received from the hands of the colonialists and their messengers. The elders who have been silent and tolerant till this point find themselves quite as enraged as Okonkwo but unlike him, they are all talk and no action as we see:

"... All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes." He stopped again to steady his trembling voice... They are not," he said. "They have broken the clan and gone their several ways. We who are here this morning have remained true to our fathers, but our brothers have deserted us and joined a stranger to soil their fatherland. If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamed of such a thing, they never killed their brothers... He sprang to his feet as soon as he saw who it was. He confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him.

In that brief moment, the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting.

The spell was broken by the head messenger. "Let me pass!" he ordered.

The waiting backcloth jumped into tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: "Why did he do it?" He wiped his machete on the sand and went away (Achebe 184-185).

Okrika, the orator confirms that even the gods and their forefathers are enraged at the atrocities committed by the invading force of the imperialist, not only are the gods and founding fathers enraged at the sacrilege being committed on their precious soil and their people, they are also weeping. Okrika perfectly puts the feelings and disheartening of the people, the founding fathers, and the gods, and goddesses of the land into words but his calls for action were about to be tested and so was the anger of every citizen of the clan of Umuofia. Obierika calls for war on the invading Europeans but is quick to also point out that a war on them will equally be a war on their brothers who had joined the enemies in committing abomination against the land. While speaking of what a sacrilege it will be to kill a member of the clan he is quick to also emphasize that the fathers and the gods will not hold it against them because they never envisaged the coming of the imperialist and the concomitant abominable acts that will follow. Obrika, therefore, beckons on the people to do what their fathers would have done in defense of their land - kill their fellow kinsmen and their imperialist masters. This call is soon tested and only Okonkwo can rise to the occasion and heed to the calls to defend his labours of his fathers and the gods of the land while the rest of his kinsmen stood in bewilderment as some questions while he had beheaded the messenger. The entire village of Umuofia descends into tumult. Rather than go after the rest of the fleeing four messengers they run in different directions to their homes. Okonkwo all his life had despised weakness and everyone that exhibited weakness, and at this point, it became clear that the good old days of Umuofia's men of valor were long gone. Fear, and cowardice and had overtaken Umuofia at this point. It is apparent that Okonkwo is now the last man standing between the total obliteration of all that the ancestors of Umuofia had labored for and the imperialists, he had become the abandoned hero left to defend Umuofia's culture and tradition alone. He is left with no other choice but to take his own life. Though many consider this as cowardice or



character weakness, Sarma disagrees as she posits that though the thought to take his own life is a hasty one, it is equally born out of an almost religious conviction. One that is in line with traditional values. She adds that his death also vindicates Okonkwo as he ends up being the last and only representative and defender of the Igbo traditional value and culture when the rest of the community is in complete tumult and disarray (69). Hence the title of the novel.

The participation of Okonkwo in the killing of Ikemefuna, the beheading of a messenger of the court, and Okonkwo's suicide all reveal another ignored fact about Okonkwo's character which is that he as a man willing to do all it takes and sacrifice all it takes to adhere to the will of the gods, culture, and traditions of the Umuofia.

He, therefore, is the embodiment of a true Umuofian and indeed the entire Igbo people. Earlier on during the killing of Ikemefuna we see that though he had come to see Ikemefuna as the son he never had, he was willing to part with him and not only part with him, and he is willing to do the bidding of the gods even if no one is willing to do it. It is clear from the time Ikemefuna arrived in Umuofia that he was doomed and it was only a matter of time before he was offered to the oracle as a sacrificial lamb. It was, therefore, a form of torture to Okonkwo to have Ikemefuna under his roof, to watch him grow into a house he wished he had and to be informed that the oracle had finally declared that he should be killed. It is gruesome to attempt to imagine what Okonkwo felt as he sat "crunching happily with Ikemefuna and Nwoye and drinking palm-wine copiously" (Achebe 56), only for Ogbuefi Ezeudu, who was said to be the great and fearless warrior in his time and also this oldest man in his quarter of Umuofia to suddenly come in with a message that the oracles of the hills and the caves had declared that Ikemefuna should be killed. Though Okonkwo is not a man to express his emotions quickly, less he is imagined to be weak. It is clear from the next line "as he still supporting his chin in his palm" (56) that he was distressed and unhappy about the whole situation yet he counted his feelings and the pain of losing the lad to be beneath the consequences of not obeying the oracles of the hills and the caves and not upholding the culture and tradition of Umuofia. Though Ogbuefi Ezeudu had advised him against having a hand in the death of Ikemefuna for the reason that Ikemefuna called him father, one could argue that to a true son of Umuofia, that might have been seen as sentimental and emotional and it was not in the habit of Okonkwo to allow his emotions get the better of him when the law of the land and the instruction of the oracle

was at stake. In Umuofia as a whole and to the Igbos, the voice of their chi, oracle, god, or goddess, and the instructions that come with it, is never something that required considerations, regardless of who was going to get hurt. Disobedience was always met with great consequences, even Ogbuefi Ezeudu knew this himself as well as Okonkwo. The beheading of the court messenger proves again that he can stand tall for his people even when no one else is willing to do so. Though there was a general dissatisfaction against what the court messengers and their foreign government. The religious sacrilege committed against the oracles of the land had become very unbearable. The anger of the people reached its climax when many of the elders and ndichie such as Okonkwo was imprisoned, had their hair shaved, beaten, and made to labor like ordinary men. They were only allowed to go back to their people after Umuofia had been made to put together the huge sum of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries (Achebe 178). The sound of the Ogene the next was the rallying cry that Okonkwo thought was going to provoke his people to war, over the night he barely slept, “the bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of childlike excitement, before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war-dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia skirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. They were all satisfactory, he had thought” (180), as one of Umuofia’s greatest warriors if not the greatest, he was ready for the war ahead. “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 avenge himself. He thought about wars in the past. The noblest, he thought, was the war against Isike. In those days Okudo was still alive. Okudo sang a war song in a way that no other man could. He was not a fighter, but his voice turned every man into a lion” (Achebe 180). Despite all these memories of when Umuofia was great at war, what their warrior accomplished in battle, Okonkwo could stop thinking how weak his people had become. He thought to himself that worthy men of such glorious times of war were no more and true to his thoughts Umuofia had become a clan of many orators but few warriors hence. The gathering of the nine clans of Umuofia began and Okika in his words captured the mindset of everyone as he said, “all our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping, Ogwugwu is weeping, Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes” (183), despite how sad and enraged they were there was

no one willing to take actions against them, and such was not the way of the Umuofians that Okonkwo knew before he was cast out on exile but Okonkwo was determined to avenge what was done to him and his people. Umuofia was never known to take orders from strangers but they had taken more than that and to crown it all the court messenger has come to stop the gathering on the orders of the district commissioner. This was more than a call to war back in the years when Umuofia was still the Umuofia that Okonkwo knew it to be but he knew that they would not go to war. The boldness of Umuofia seemed to have given way to the weak and cowardly one. Weak and ordinary messengers of the court now stood fearlessly before Okonkwo, the *ndichie*, and thousands of Umuofia men to order them to stop their meeting. Standing between the complete fall of Umuofia and the messengers of the court was Okonkwo, the last worthy and noble warrior of Umuofia, the last defender of her culture and tradition. “In that brief moment, the world seemed to stand still, waiting. There was utter silence. The men of Umuofia were merged into the mute backcloth of trees and giant creepers, waiting” (159), Umuofia waited, waited for the response of their great warrior, Okonkwo responded, and in flash, he beheaded the head messenger but it was too late his fellow worthy men were no more hence Umuofia became like women as Okonkwo had said of his mother’s in Mbanta.

If there was one thing that angered Okonkwo, it was the display of fear, weakness, and cowardice. Okonkwo completely trusted that none of these would overtake his precious people of Umuofia but alas he was left bewildered by how weak they had grown in his absence. Okonkwo exaggerates the bravery and boldness of his people as we see that while in exile at Mbanta, he is informed by his friend Obierika of how the colonialists and their servants had almost wiped out the entire village of Abame. Okonkwo blames the people for their misfortune and believes that they should have prepared themselves for war after killing the harbinger of the colonialist entrance into their village (Achebe 129). Okonkwo by regarding the Mbame people like fools for not preparing for war believes that Umuofia will not fall the way Mbame fell as they have great men of valor, Umuofia, he believes it is a land where their men are men of war and bravery (150) like him. He, Okonkwo believes in his heart that there is no way, the people of Umuofia can be compared to the people Abame because they will be cowards to do as the fathers of the Mbame village never stood to fight the ancestors of the Umuofia (160). He equally thinks the same of his mother’s village,

Mbanta. When the colonialists through their missionary work arrive in Mbanta and began preaching and converting people to their new religion, Okonkwo could only see his mother's clan as a woman's clan because what they have entertained in their village would not be tolerated in his father's land Umuofia (Achebe 147). Time will however prove him wrong as we see at the village meeting of Umuofia that he is completely crestfallen upon discovering that his people will truly not go to war despite how enraged they appear to be by the actions of the colonialists and their brothers who had joined them. "Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart, and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women"(166). It is in his deep grief, sorrow, and disappointment at how weak and cowardly Umuofia had become that Okonkwo decides to take his own life.

The beheading of the court messenger, the tumult amongst the people, the disappointment of Okonkwo, and his sudden death point to the gross changes that had taken place both in the minds of the people of Umuofia in the absence of Okonkwo and lead us to question if these abominations and changes would have gotten this far if Okonkwo had not been cast out into exile by his clan. Before the departure of Okonkwo into exile, Umuofia was greatly feared and respected by the neighboring villages. Everyone feared them when it came to matters of war and to a great extent the exploits of Okonkwo in their many battles did not go unnoticed by the villages of Umuofia and their neighbors and that this was a major contributing factor to that fear. When Ezeugo, the wife of Ogbuefi Udo was killed, Umuofia needed to react in a way that brandished and demonstrated their dissatisfaction and anger. Without hesitation, "an ultimatum was immediately dispatched to Mbaino asking them to choose between war - on the one hand, and on the other hand, they must offer a young man and a virgin as compensation" (Achebe 16). To relay this ultimatum, Umuofia needed a man whose reputation in matters of war and temper could match the urgent and truculent nature of the message, Okonkwo was the man called upon to lead the "proud and imperious emissary of war" and just as expected, he and his group members were treated to well-deserved honor and respect by their host (17). Upon the return of Okonkwo and the other emissaries, the Ndichie collectively decide that while the virgin that was brought home should go to Ogbuefi Udo as compensation for his deceased wife, Ezeugo, Ikemefuna, the young lad that was given as the lamb that sacrificed to avert war

between Umuofia and Mbaino should be left with Okonkwo until the clan or the oracle would decide what would be done with him. Through these two scenarios, it is clear that the Ndichie or elders of Umuofia have their faith rested on the shoulders of Okonkwo to defend them. He is expected to be the voice of the people. One, therefore, reckons that though the Umuofians are greatly angered by the atrocities committed against their gods and their land, in the absence of Okonkwo, no one can lead them to war. The invading army was free to ravage through their culture, tradition, and every area of their life. There was no voice strong enough to speak for them.

Upon his return to Umuofia, Okonkwo was greatly dismayed by the level of damage to the heart, the voice of his people, their culture, traditional and religious beliefs. It becomes more glaring to him that his Umuofia was no longer the way he left, the colonialist through the work of the missionary had turned many astray from their culture and tradition. Not only did they lead the weak in the heart, outcast, and effeminate away, they also led both the strong and respected people like Ugbuefi Ogbonna astray (Achebe 158). The power of the oracles, the gods and the goddess that protected them from the anger of their ancestors and their gods were left neglected and even questioned. The Europeans insulted their gods by declaring that they were not living but dead gods which lack the power to do any harm to anyone because they were simply carved out of pieces of wood and stone. The gods and goddesses of Umuofia had been insulted, derided, and desecrated to their faces and Umuofia's only response was to walk away smiling (135), we know that had Okonkwo been on the ground, at this point, he certainly would demand that such actions and sacrilege against their gods be matched with equal consequences.

Though Okonkwo knew that while he was in exile at Mbanta, "he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan" (Achebe 156), he had believed also that another man would have risen to take his place to help in administering justice to the people of Umuofia but that was not the case rather the colonialists brought their system of government that began administering their form of justice on the people of Umuofia for which they judged ignorantly. Not only had they brought their system of government and judged cases ignorantly, they equally locked up men who broke laws that were simply on the books of a foreign government and instructed effeminate men by the standards of Umuofia to torture them while in prison (159). Umuofia in the absence of Okonkwo had lost her identity, they were no longer

a people of boldness and courage, they could no longer decide for themselves what was right and what was wrong. The failure of Umuofia to find a strong and befitting replacement for Okonkwo who will stand, lead, and defend the people remains a major failure among the people. Okonkwo is not disappointed by the fact that in his absence “he had lost the chance to lead the warlike clan against the new religion, which he was told, had gained ground” (156), he is equally angry that his people have allowed the prophecy of the oracles of Abame (Achebe 109) to come to fruition in Umuofia. His disappointment, therefore, appears in two folds. He is disappointed that the justice and the defense system of Umuofia have fallen. He is disappointed that Umuofia has been crippled and made to lick the dust.

As Obierika attempts to update him with the events that had overtaken Umuofia, Okonkwo is completely at loss concerning all that had transpired while he was away in exile. Okonkwo’s frustration and exasperation are manifest as he bows his head down in sorrow and misery only to wonder to himself that he might have been away for too long, despite this, he is unable to comprehend what had happened to his people and why they had lost their will and power to fight back (160). Okonkwo’s return to his homeland was not as memorable as he had imagined while in Mbanta since most of the things that occupied the heart of Umuofians were either the sacrileges committed by the colonialists and their cohorts, the court system, or the new trade system they had brought along with them. Okonkwo’s return was barely in the mind of the people except that his daughters were taken note of by the men who began in earnest to seek their hand in marriage (Achebe 166). This did little to deterring Okonkwo’s desire to reclaim his place and rally his people against the enemy that had committed great and abominable acts against their gods and threatened to destroy the soul of what held Umuofia and her people together. In a short while, Okonkwo begins to achieve this and the people begin to regain their boldness and willingness to do something about the missionaries and their sacrilegious works for which even the gods of Abame are even warned against. “For the first time in many years, Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness. The times which had altered so unaccountably during his exile seemed to be coming round again. The clan which had turned false on him appeared to be making amends.

He had spoken violently to his clansmen when they had met in the marketplace to decide on their actions. And they had listened to him with respect. It was like the good

old days again, when a warrior was a warrior. Although they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away from the Christians, they had agreed to do something substantial. And they had done it. Okonkwo was almost happy again” (Achebe 149). At this point, there is a very compelling argument and proof to believe that Umuofia’s failure to respond to the atrocities against their gods, fathers, and their entire nine villages was partly due to the absence of a voice that could rally them to stand up and fight in defense of their land. Okonkwo had always been that voice willing to speak up and that man willing to stand up for in defense of the land as we see that he without hesitation hacked down Ikemefuna, a child that he had begun to see and take as his son that he never had but was in the first handed over to Umuofia as a sacrificial lamb for the cleansing and purging of the land. It becomes more evidently obvious that in the absence of Okonkwo, Umuofia had lost a lot of what made her a well-respected clan and true to Okonkwo’s imaginations most of these losses and damages were irreparable and the loss of seven years which he was determined to redeem was beyond redemption (Achebe 156). Okonkwo's hope of rallying his people back to action and declare war against the invasion of their land and the entire Igbo land by extension comes to a sudden and abrupt end as we see that the people even in his death refused to take advantage of the death of such a great warrior to rally against the atrocities of the invaders on their land.

## CONCLUSION

This story of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* continues to remain one of the most intriguing novels of all time that portrays the life of the Igbos through the life of the people of Umuofia. The story highlights the pre-colonial and colonial-era life of the people, the rise and fall of Okonkwo who happens to the protagonist of the novel as written by Achebe. It is not, however, the place of the novel in history nor the authority of the author that this work set out to explore. I set out in this work to explore the possibility that Chinua Achebe in his most celebrated and successful novel until this date, might have unwittingly approved the colonization agenda of the Western world by villainizing Okonkwo—the hero of Umuofia, the cultural, religious, and traditional life of the people of Umuofia, the Igbo of the eastern part of Nigeria and the entire African continent. Though in his exploration of the predicaments of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Nnoromele asserts that he does not agree that Achebe is the architect of Okonkwo failure, he does not buy the suggestion or accusation that Achebe allowed his protagonist to fail, he, however, posits that Achebe took the position of a neutral writer and individual writing in a non-committal style (156). It is on the premises of such thoughts that I have attempted to examine the life, the mind, and the intentions of Chinua Achebe and his numerous supporters, especially in the western world to ascertain why such an illustrious son of an Igboland will take a non-committal position when life offered him the position and opportunity to defend the heritage of his people and set a standard definition of what the future sons of Umuofia, the Igboland and the entire African continent should do when the need to defend the land arose. Through a careful study of the life of Achebe and his family background, there is an understanding that his multicultural and multireligious exposure played a part in shaping his mind as an individual and then as a writer. The impact of such exposure led to the need and desire to write as one hoping to bridge the gap between the culture and lifestyles that he was exposed to instead of writing as one desiring to defend the heritage of his people or to raise defenders of the culture and traditional life of the people. In an attempt to examine how Okonkwo is portrayed and presented by both Achebe, other writers, and critics, I have focused on exploring the definitions of



who a hero is and the cultural expectations on the shoulders of whoever desires to be regarded as a hero among the Igbos. Narrowing my focus on the cultural to the Igbo definition and cultural expectations on the hero for this particular tribe is solely consequent to the fact that Achebe, the writer himself is a Nigerian and it is even more relevant to that I take this route because he is an Igbo man and his creation of Okonkwo revolves mainly around the lives of the Igbos.

The killing of Ikemefuna, the killing of the young boy mourning his father, and the subsequent banishment of Okonkwo to his mother's village all appear to be Achebe's subtle way of introducing the Umuofians to the culture of the Western world. The vacuum created by Okonkwo who is portrayed as fierce and angry in his ways is quietly and easily replaced by Mr. Brown who is portrayed as the stark opposite of Okonkwo in many ways. We see the subtle nature of such villainization as we observe that Mr. Smith, the next missionary to take over from Mr. Brown appears to be even worse than Okonkwo.

The subtle villainization of Okonkwo and the entire life of the people of Umuofia and which ends up as Achebe's unwitting approval of colonization and all the atrocities of the colonizers all over the Igboland and the African continent remains one of the aspects of the novel that is yet to be fully explored. The further exploration of many aspects of the novel and the missed opportunities to project Okonkwo as the hero that Umuofia needed in times of crisis would eventually lead to a better understanding of how the mind of Achebe functioned and his reason for choosing to be a cultural bridge rather than to be the man who defined African heroism in the face of colonial threats of subjugation and domination.

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