

## How the Centre Cannot Hold in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Objectification and Alienation of Children.

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### Abstract

This article examines objectification and alienation of children in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The Ibo culture portrayed in the novel does not treat children as human beings but as the property of the father and the community. The community exercises absolute powers over children. They have no voice within the family and community. As children, Ikemefuna and a young virgin girl suffer deracination in order for their village, Mbaino, to avoid war and bloodshed against Umuofia after the former killed a daughter of Umuofia. Children born twins are sacrificed because they are considered an abomination on the land; and Nwoye is subjected to corporal punishment by his father because he wants to mould the child into a culturally acceptable man in future. Although Achebe attempts to portray the Umuofia community as an organic whole prior to the entry of European colonialism, the Ibo culture's objectification and alienation of children, categorization and consequent discrimination between its members undermined the harmony and cohesion of the society. Nwoye, and mothers of twins whose children were sacrificed never embraced the Ibo culture that promoted various crimes against children. Their desertion of the Ibo culture to join Christianity shows that they were not fully incorporated into clan life. In this article, I argue that the harmony and cohesion of the pre-colonial Ibo society that Achebe attempts to depict in *Things Fall Apart* is highly illusory.

**Key words:** child sacrifice, corporal punishment, deracination, objectification

Chinua Achebe is considered by many African literary scholars as the father of the African novel. He is the pioneer of a mode of African imaginative expression which Kwame Anthony Appiah describes as "the archetypal modern African novel in English" (Appiah 1992: ix). His first novel, *Things Fall Apart* has acquired as Abiola Irele asserts "the status of a classic by reason of its character as a counter fiction of Africa, in specific relation to the discourse of Western colonial domination, and its creative deployment of the language of the imperial" (Irele 2000:2). Achebe creatively employs English language and Ibo vocabulary to dramatize the encounter between the traditional Ibo religion and Christianity. He wrote the novel with the aim of correcting the negative images about Africa as depicted in colonial literature particularly Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. Joyce Cary's main character Mister Johnson, an African civil servant working for the colonial government in Nigeria, is portrayed as a mindless creature, or imbecile, a savage who does not have a moral sense. He is a liar, a thief and perpetually desires to copy European values. The contact with Europe is what gives him a sense of civilization.

Achebe finds *Mister Johnson* a misrepresentation of the African situation and as in *Home and Exile* argues, "until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter" (Achebe 2000:73). He in an interview with Lewis Nkosi says:

I was quite certain I was going to try my hand at writing, and one of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary's novel set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture of, not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at it from the inside (Nkosi 1972:4).

In writing *Things Fall Apart* Achebe, as an indigenous African was aiming at telling the story of life of his people as it used to be and as he states in *The Novelist as Teacher* help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self abasement. And as he further says "it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word" (Achebe 1988:44). He contests the depiction of European values as the core values of society and focuses on the ideas of resistance. He attempts to educate the reader of *Things Fall Apart* that although there were imperfections in African societies, the past was not one long night of savagery from which the first European delivered them. As Killam in *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* asserts:

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans...their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty...they had poetry and, above all they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period (Killam 1969:8).

The Ibo culture had significant values contained in songs, stories, festivals, rituals and wrestling matches. These practices helped in the dissemination of ethical and moral ideals. The Ibo society portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* values hard work, patriotism and courage in war fare. Consequently a man is respected and rewarded with titles of achievement on the basis of these cultural values. The people are organized politically under the leadership of men of titles known as Egwugwu, who dispense justice according to the cultural values of the people.

The Ibo people are also religious as shown in the array of gods they worship and to whom they make sacrifices for deliverance from pain and misfortune. They carry out traditional marriage ceremonies and dispense traditional medicine to cure diseases such as fever (Iba). The Ibo are great lovers of sports as demonstrated in the wrestling matches they organize to entertain the public, as well as display the values of manliness, loyalty and allegiance to the community. The Ibo community is given fuller expression in the Ibo language and in the art of conversation as demonstrated by abundant use of proverbs. As Okoye in *Things Fall Apart* says: "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 1958:5). Thus Achebe draws a picture of a well structured social and religious order in the Ibo society. However, Achebe does not entirely focus on the positive values of the society. He balances this portrayal by showing the weaknesses of the Ibo culture. The most troubling aspect of it is the law that requires sacrifice of twins, sacrifice of Ikemefuna and deracination of children. The Ibo culture too engages in deliberate categorization and consequent discrimination between its members. The system endorses and sustains particular definitions of success and failure. On the surface, the system looks equitable but if examined closely it favors the already privileged and dominant members of the community.

Although Achebe shows the good as well as the bad side of the past, he nevertheless down plays the flaws in the Ibo culture. The title of the novel, "Things Fall Apart" implies that the Umuofia community was an organic whole only to be disrupted by the brutal entry of European colonialists. As Obierika, one of the major characters in the novel says:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart (Achebe 1958:126-127).

Through Obierika, Achebe castigates the white man for disrupting the harmony and cohesion that existed in Umuofia yet, as Ousseina Alidou observes:

The Umuofian moral order that gave society its sense of cohesion and integrity was experiencing some severe 'cracks' just at a time when it was engaged in a new encounter with an external force. Prominent among these cracks was the privileging of the male principle at the expense of the female, sometimes in total negation of the spiritual order. These cracks in Umuofian moral order that unjustly favoured some and condemned others made the society vulnerable to the external culture invasion of Christianity and colonialism (Alidou 2000:122-123).

Alidou points at the cracks in the Ibo society that render the supposedly harmony and cohesion of the society illusory. Notable among the cracks is the discrimination of women at the family level and in the public space. As Florence Stratton argues:

Achebe himself generally avoids questioning the hierarchical nature of gender relations in Umuofia society, an indication of his attitude towards the status quo of male domination...While the novel does take up as one of its primary concerns the issue of the over valuation in Umuofia of masculine qualities to the exclusion of feminine ones, it retreats from consideration of the issue of the imbalance of power in gender relations (Stratton 1994:28).

Stratton discusses the imbalance of power in gender relations that results in discrimination of women from the political, the economic and the judicial system in society. Achebe's women characters are silent on their inferior status as the property of man. They are not seen challenging male domination. The biggest challenge to the cohesion of the society emanates from culture's objectification and alienation of children through deracination and child sacrifice.

The Umuofia society does not treat children as human beings but as the property of the father. For example the narrator states: "There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three barns, nine wives and thirty children" (Achebe 1958:13). The narrator treats the three barns, the nine wives and thirty children as if they were at the same level. The statement implies that the barns, the wives and children are all objects of wealth. Although Achebe respects his society, he realizes the injustice of treating human beings as possessions. Hence as children, Ikemefuna, and a young virgin girl suffer deracination in order for their village, Mbaino, to avoid war and bloodshed against Umuofia after the former killed a daughter of Umuofia. The elders of Umuofia decide to give Ikemefuna to Okonkwo and the virgin girl to Ogbuefi Udo as a wife in compensation for his wife killed in Mbaino. No more information is given about the young virgin girl. The only information given about her that seems to matter to the village is that she has become Ogbuefi Udo's wife. She is projected as having no say in the choices for her life. Her destiny is determined by an already fixed cultural practice. She is anonymous and powerless. She loses her individuality because of her clan's actions. Similarly, Ikemefuna cannot understand why he is given to a stranger and neither his father nor Okonkwo is ready to offer to him an explanation. The alienation affects him emotionally. As the omniscient narrator states:

At first Ikemefuna was very much afraid. Once or twice he tried to run away, but he did not know where to begin. He thought of his mother and his three-year-old sister and wept bitterly. Nwoye's mother was very kind to him and treated him as one of her own children. But all he said was: 'when shall I go home?' When Okonkwo heard that he would not eat any food he came into their hut with a big stick in his hand and stood over him while he swallowed his yams, trembling. A few moments later he went behind the hut and began to vomit painfully. Nwoye's mother went to him and placed her hands on his chest and on his back. He was ill for three market weeks, and when he recovered he seemed to have overcome his great fear and sadness (Achebe 1958:20).

Ikemefuna longs for his home and is afraid as perhaps any child would be in a strange environment. He misses his mother and sister deeply and wished for the familiarity of home. Okonkwo who is also a product of the Ibo cultural set up that disregards children is inconsiderate to the young boy's loneliness and fright. He threatens the boy and forces him to eat but Ikemefuna vomits the food because of the emotional trauma. Nwoye's mother sympathizes with Ikemefuna and treats him humanely. She understands Ikemefuna's trauma and treats him as one of her children. The narrator emphasizes Nwoye's mother's nurturing of Ikemefuna in contrast with Okonkwo's typically bully's approach and the society's callousness in separating him from his family and clan.

Although Ikemefuna slowly integrates into Okonkwo's homestead and finds good company in Nwoye, this second home never redresses his sense of loss and alienation. As a child he is sacrificed in order to bail out the community. Micere Mugo's findings from the elders on the question of Ikemefuna vis a vis the cultural practices of the community reveal that,

Most of the elders interviewed could not see the irony in the fact that it was inhuman to deracinate children and other people from their roots as victims of famine and war. They found it even more difficult to concede that a second home, however hospitable, can never redress the sense of loss and alienation experienced by the victims. They argued that custom allowed the exchange to take place and that as long as this was the case, no human rights had been violated (Mugo 1991:15).

The elders do not question the supremacy of the custom over Ikemefuna's emotional and mental attachment to his parents' home. Rather they, recognize childhood in the context of custom and community practices. Under these circumstances Ikemefuna has no choice in the matter of his destiny. The community exercises absolute authority over his life. The writer thus reveals the violence that the more vulnerable groups suffer in the community.

No sooner Ikemefuna becomes wholly absorbed into his new family after three years than Umuofia decides to sacrifice him: "Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it" (Achebe 1958:40). The Oracle is perceived as supreme. The will of the Oracle gives life and direction to the clan. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna should be taken expressly on the will of the Oracle. Although the execution may be counter-productive to especially the feelings of Okonkwo and his family, the sacrifice must be carried out for the maintenance of the universal well being of the society. When time to sacrifice Ikemefuna comes, Okonkwo tells the young boy a lie and convinces him that he is going back to his home. But the terror he experiences due to the elder's behavior while on the journey makes him doubt the truth of Okonkwo's words:

One of the old men behind him cleared his throat. Ikemefuna looked back, and the man

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

As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'my father they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down (Achebe 1958:43).

Ikemefuna is not treated as a human being with feelings and mental faculties, but as a cornered beast. He is isolated, terrified and his appeal to Okonkwo as a father figure does not help him. At this moment the human bonds no longer matter. Ikemefuna is slaughtered like an animal. The elders' conduct in the process of carrying out the will of the Oracle is devoid of compassion. They use the confidence of their authority to terrorize the helpless child. Okonkwo who deep inside has strong sympathy for Ikemefuna cannot resist participation because of his own personal fear of being thought weak and afraid of blood by the community. In essence, Okonkwo's brutality against Ikemefuna is a product of the society's social and psychological pressure that has dogged Okonkwo's entire life. As Kortenaar argues:

When Okonkwo's adopted son Ikemefuna is sentenced to death by the oracle, Okonkwo accompanies the executioners. He does this to prove his fidelity to the oracle. He sets divine authority above personal sentiment. But this is the loyalty of the doubter who must prove to himself his uncompromising faith. In participating in the execution, Okonkwo flouts the advice of the elder Ezeudu. The law is not universal and absolute, but made by men operating in historical circumstances. This Ezeudu understands. The law will be obeyed but it need not be carried out by Okonkwo personally. Okonkwo however misunderstands the law. He wants it to be universal and to govern all situations. It does not (Kortenaar 1995:47).

As stated above, Okonkwo is not duty bound to participate in the execution of Ikemefuna. The only opposition to the sacrifice, though passive and directed to Okonkwo comes from Obierika. Obierika's loyalty to the cultural values of the society is not that of an over-zealous and thoughtless member of the clan like Okonkwo. But whether Okonkwo participates or not, and whether any member of the society disapproves of the act or not, the law is clear and must be obeyed: Ikemefuna must be sacrificed to appease the community. The Ibo culture allows child sacrifice and the participants do not question this practice that disregards Ikemefuna's life as a human being. On the day Ikemefuna was killed and Nwoye realized that he was dead, it seemed as if something had snapped inside him. Nwoye would never be the same again and this event would forever influence his thoughts and feelings.

Okonkwo returns home after killing Ikemefuna guilty and haunted. For once he becomes human. The paternal instinct resurrects because he remembers the boy called him father. He loses sleep and appetite for food. As the narrator says:

Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank 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...He did not sleep at night. He tried not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he tried the more he thought about him. Once he got up from bed and walked about his compound. But he was so weak that his legs could hardly carry him. He felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito. Now and then a cold shiver descended on his head and spread down his body (Achebe 1958:45).

Okonkwo participates in the killing of Ikemefuna out of fear that he might be deemed a coward. He is overwhelmed and traumatized by his action so much that he can neither sleep for three days nor eat for two days. He drinks palm-wine all the time to forget the incident, but he fails to stop thinking about the boy. The death of the boy calls into conflict many things he believes about himself in terms of his manliness and bravery. He has always acted out of fear of being thought weak and effeminate. He must overcome the trauma:

'When did you become a shivering old woman,' Okonkwo asked himself, 'you are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war. How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo you have become a woman indeed' (Achebe 1958:46).

Okonkwo refers to Ikemefuna as a 'boy' in order to deprive himself of the feeling of paternal relationship he had with Ikemefuna. He decides to man up and dismisses his pain. He behaves superficially because society conditioned him to act manly in order to earn respect and titles. His background shapes much of his violent demeanor because he wants to rise above his father's legacy. He therefore strips himself of compassion, altruism and understanding that balanced human beings possess in order to achieve the standards set by the society.

Achebe sets up the position of helpless children vis-à-vis the powerful cultural system upheld by elders of the community. By custom the Ibo sacrifice children who are twins by throwing them into the forest to die. Obierika's twins are thrown into the forest to die as a consequence of the cultural belief that they are an abomination on the land and the will of the Earth Goddess must be observed lest her wrath is loosed on all the land. But Obierika wonders about the crime they had committed (Achebe 1958:87). Many questions are left unanswered in the minds of Obierika, the mothers of twins and Nwoye as well. In the context of *Things Fall Apart*, child sacrifice has dire consequences on the cohesion of the society. Among the people who abandon the Ibo culture and join the White man's religion are Osus and mother of twins whose children were thrown into evil forest: "These outcasts, or Osu, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would be received. And so one Sunday two of them went to church" (Achebe 1958:111). Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* deals with how the prospect and reality of change affects various characters. Okonkwo resists the new political and religious dispensation for fear of losing societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. Nwoye, mothers of twins and Osus find Christian value system a refuge from the Ibo cultural values that oppress them. In their new community, the converts enjoy a more elevated status. The loopholes in the social and justice system create a crisis to which Christianity offers a solution. The weak, helpless and vulnerable have no space in the traditional culture and so they find it under the new religion. Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son who never seemed to get on with his father and dreaded his callousness especially after Okonkwo participated in the killing of Ikemefuna abandons his homestead and joins Christianity whose teachings answered his persistence fears:

.... There was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed (Achebe 1958:104).

Both Nwoye and Obierika lament the death of innocent children. The authorial voice depicts various incidents of crimes against children and consequently questions the relevance of Ibo culture that victimizes innocent children.

Nwoye finds life difficult to live under the harsh and unrelenting cultural values of his society that Okonkwo champions unquestioningly. He struggles in the shadow of his powerful, successful and demanding father. His interests are different from Okonkwo's and resemble more closely those of Unoka, his grandfather who was indolent. Okonkwo administers corporal punishment to him and the boy is at a loss on how to please his father. He subjects Nwoye to hard labour and corporal punishment in the hope of molding him into a culturally acceptable man in future. Because Okonkwo is obsessed with the cultural values of manliness and hard work and is haunted by his past, he does not give room to individual differences and abilities. He subjects Nwoye to labour that is not commensurate with his age:

'Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?' he asked Nwoye. 'If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child. I began to own a farm at your age. 'And you', he said to Ikemefuna, 'do you not grow yams where you come from?'. Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams (Achebe 1958:23).

The above passage demonstrates the sheer violence with which Okonkwo often treats Nwoye in particular and the irrational standards that he subjects the boy to. He threatens to break Nwoye's jaw and reminds him that he owned a farm at his age. This intimidation is harsh and unrelenting. Okonkwo's threats to Nwoye are due to his individual fears of having a weak son who would not measure up to the qualities of manliness that society upholds. Okonkwo thinks that by subjecting Nwoye to corporal punishment he would shape the boy's behavior. However, it does not work. Instead his threats and nagging affect Nwoye psychologically as the boy lives in perpetual fear of his father. He grows to hate his father and the cultural values he stands for. With the unconscionable murder of Ikemefuna, Nwoye retreats into himself and finds himself forever changed. His reluctance to accept Okonkwo's masculine values turns into pure embitterment towards him and his ways. When

missionaries come to Mbanta, Nwoye's hope and faith are reawakened and he eventually joins forces with them because he correctly sees it as an opportunity to destroy his father's world. The constant beatings therefore do not change Nwoye and he certainly does not behave the way Okonkwo desires. For instance, he does not abandon Christianity after his father's savage beating:

One morning Okonkwo's cousin, Amikwu, was passing by the church on his way from the neighbouring village when he saw Nwoye among the Christians... When he got home he went straight to Okonkwo's hut and told him what he had seen... It was late afternoon before Nwoye returned. He went into the Obi and saluted his father, but he did not answer. Nwoye turned round to walk into the inner compound when his father, suddenly overcome with fury, sprang to his feet and gripped him by the neck.  
'Where have you been?' he stammered.  
Nwoye struggled to free himself from the choking grip.  
'Answer me' roared Okonkwo, 'before I kill you! He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows.  
'Answer me!' he roared again. Nwoye stood looking at him and did not say a word. The women were screaming outside, afraid to go in.  
'Leave that boy at once!' said a voice in the outer compound. It was Okonkwo's uncle Uchendu. 'Are you mad?'  
Okonkwo did not answer. But he left hold of Nwoye, who walked away and never returned (Achebe 1958:107).

Nwoye's failure to show any emotion is an indication of his rebellion and rejection of what his father represents. He thinks that in Christianity he has found answers to his deepest fears. He has found space where he is free from violence of his father's household and hence he becomes defiant and assertive. He walks away from his father's continual intimidation and harshness. When Obierika finds him among Christians and asks him how his father is, he replies: "I don't know. He is not my father (Achebe 1958:101). His answer indicates naivety but also reveals that he has decided to reject a system he perceives as subjecting him to physical and psychological terror. He disowns his father for not treating him as a human being with feelings. He walks away and never returns because he has found peace at last in leaving the oppressive atmosphere of his father's tyranny. Okonkwo's constant beatings fail to transform the young boy into a fearless, hardworking and respectable person who would uphold the cultural values of his society as Okonkwo desired. Nwoye's situation and his reaction show that the solution to the problem is not to come up with horrendous punishments but to abandon the whole notion that the primary purpose of punishment should be deterrence. It should be as Emil Durkheim says, "an expression of the sentiment of disapproval, based on a moral evaluation of the act" (Durkheim 1992:123). Okonkwo seems to believe in punishment as a deterrent. This is clearly shown in this passage:

During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farm from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue. But his wives and young children were not as strong, and so they suffered. But they dared not complain openly. Okonkwo's son Nwoye was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating (Achebe 1958:10).

Nwoye fails to attach a moral evaluation on the punishment he and other children such as twins and Ikemefuna have been given in accordance with cultural demands and beliefs. Okonkwo's constant nagging is not a corrective measure but psychological harassment of Nwoye, while savage beating inflicts physical pain on the boy, both of which hasten his escape to Christianity.

The fate of Ikemefuna and twins; and Nwoye's suffering depict society's failure to recognize the position of children as subjects in the sense of people with mental and emotional faculties who can speak for themselves and need to be acknowledged. The community promotes the idea of parents as agents of pain who victimize the children under their protection. The introduction of a new culture that provides an alternative philosophy provides escape for the down trodden. Those who initially converted to Christianity are members of the clan who have not been fully incorporated into clan life. The first woman convert in Mbanta has had four sets of twins who have been thrown into the evil forest. Once the outcasts, see that the church accepts twins and other matters seen by the clan as abominations, they join the new church. Nwoye, who cannot accept Okonkwo's harshness and especially his killing of Ikemefuna, finds in the poetry of Christianity the promise of brotherhood. Achebe acknowledges that the meeting of different cultures inevitably leads to displacement which can only be

understood if the culture is scrutinized both from within its ranks and from without. Nwoye and mothers of twins' protest and desertion of the community shows the power of children as integral members of the community that need to be protected by the existing cultural and social structures.

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