



*Literature & Life*



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**SOCIO-CULTURAL  
PERSPECTIVES  
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## PORTRAIT OF IGBO SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN THINGS FALL APART

DR. CHITRA SIYA SUBRAMANIAM

Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* analyses 'the people of the bush' or otherwise the Igbo society in terms of the polarity of the masculine and feminine virtues. The Igbo cultural values institute the feminine in a powerful position within the governing system, to suggest a subtle interfusion of the two principles of male and female. In the narrative there is a continuous emphasis on male dominated activities – the oratory of men before the gathered clan, the acquisition and cultivation of farm lands, courage and resourcefulness in sport and war, proving their prowess in inter-tribal wars collecting human head, polygamy and the giving and taking of brides. However the masculine virtues require and give place to the feminine virtues of mercy and love.

The protagonist, Okonkwo, is a representative of his clan, but his individualism finally leads to his defeat. The tragic hero did not have to suppress all feelings of tenderness, internalize the shame he felt at his father's failure since his society does not insist on heredity. He feels he can no longer act as a man among men. The proverb "... if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (21) shows that anyone can 'get up'. Okonkwo's downfall is due to his neurotic concern with 'manliness'. "Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit" (34). His inability to appreciate the life of his father leads to a series of finally unresolvable conflicts. The nature of the character relates to the narrow limits of action defined by his society as 'manly' and shows how his character precludes the exercise of feminine virtues of tolerance, tenderness and patience.

'Feast of the New Yam' was an occasion for honouring Ani, the earth goddess and the source for all fertility. The goddess "played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity" (41). "She is the ultimate judge of morality and conduct" (41). Okonkwo who stands for manliness violates 'the Week of Peace' by beating his

wife which is period of heightened cultural consciousness; a time of tolerance, relaxation and peaceful co-existence. In spite of the 'manly' values being inadequate he ensures the growth of his son's 'manliness' by stopping him from mother stories which he despises as 'silly'; unless they are heroic masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. He fails to understand that the mother stories are in means of sensitizing young minds to the values and social attitudes and prepare them to participate constructively.

Contrary to the father's expectations, the son cherishes the feminine values of his culture and preferred stories like the cosmic myth of the primeval quarrel of Earth and Sky in which the quarrel is not resolved through overt demonstration of masculinity and power but through Vulture – the earth's emissary with its song for mercy. The father's dedication to the masculine principle and the son's espousal of the feminine principle create an unbridgeable impasse that end in total alienation from each other.

The Earth and Sky myth is extended to another level of analogy where both the Hero and Vulture are flawed messengers. Okonkwo fails to round off his mission in the case of Ikemefuna, the lad who calls him 'father'. The mysterious decision by the oracles of Umuofia is for the maintenance of the universal well-being making people to comply with the expression of religious duty and faith. The oracle encourages masculine virtues of war and solidarity and is responsible for the unity of the village by urging its act that enforces its integrity in cruel acts. The judgement of the ancestors on an action like Okonkwo's indicate his insecurity and bad temper which frequently lead him to act contrary to his society's values. Okonkwo has destroyed the invisible bridge between ritual and family, symbolic act and ties of kinship due to the role played by him in Ikemefuna's sacrifice.

The oracle is perceived to be supreme; correlating the will of oracle with the life and direction of the clan not only necessitates the transference of old pieties for new; a metamorphosis demanded by the realities of revised socio-economic hierarchy but also a reversal in Okonkwo's fortunes with the brutal assault on traditional moral order. The individual's personal god 'chi', the guardian angel is also prepared to shun him from the community. By cutting himself off from wholesome feminine influence in favour of overcompensating masculinity, the hero sets the stage for a life to be filled with crises and pain in spite of its great potentialities and achievements. This is prefigured in the fate of the trickster tortoise, the egoist named All-of-You, in the trickster tale 'the Tortoise and the Birds'. He is an achiever and has capabilities but cannot be 'All-of-You'. In pursuit of individualistically determined obsessions the trickster comes into conflict with society and so does Okonkwo; by assuming the role

of All-of –You, he finds himself in conflict with the clan and thus alienates himself from his tribal world.

Okonkwo's glory is secure and well-based in those actions in which he is in full accord with the will of the clan but when his actions are at odds and discordant with the will of the group, he risks isolation and ultimate defeat. His final rupture arouses room for clarification why the champion of tradition should be abandoned by the very people he is trying to save. His weakness is his hubris including his over-assertiveness of individual passions and destructive pride and obsessions.

Just as individuals pay a personal price for community solidarity, the community too must be of no discomfort with its practices. There are men of no titles called 'agbala', 'efulefu' or worthless empty men, osu slaves, the group of outcasts and mothers of twins who abandon them, the infant twins in the 'Evil Forest' to die. The community sanctions violence as an integral part of life, ostracizes the weak and abnormal, imposes subordination of women to men has many superstitions practices into 'ogbanje' the belief that an 'ogbanje' child was "one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered their mother's wombs to be born again" (71) and so on. Society's lack of adaptation makes it vulnerable to the promises of the new religion. The relationship between Umuofia and Christianity describes male-female hierarchy in which Umuofia considers its own self masculine and privileged. A 'feminine' valence attached to the Christians due to its embodying and stressing qualities – love, tolerance, affection and mercy finds it easy to captivate the depressed. Achebe exposes the underlying tensions of Igbo society that facilitate the new religion to penetrate. Okonkwo evaluates the missionaries as "effeminate men clucking like old hens" (126).

The missionaries' effective measure by changing the scenario of 'evil forest' where the diseased were buried, into a religious place succeeds in attracting all tribal men marginalized by the Igbo practices. This emasculates the society, making it incapable of standing as one. This is the time when Okonkwo in his own society lapses into the unawareness of 'the world of others'. His death cheats the Whites of their revenge; it merely reflects his mental and emotional destruction. Umuofia's 'castration' with Okonkwo's suicide represents the ultimate overthrow of its masculine principles. The opportunity given to Okonkwo to restructure his personality on a more balanced combination of masculine and feminine influences has been lost. This is a contradictory phase of Igbo culture and not a complete annihilation of the society.

The Igbo with its 'oneness' and 'uniqueness' is expected to respond to novel situations. This is explicit in the tale 'The Tortoise and Birds' where the tortoise manages to fly with the help of the birds who give and renoussess their feathers. The

tale demonstrates their ability to participate in the historical process of change. This is the kind of 'invented tradition' that Okonkwo ought to have responded to the historical exigencies which explain the past as a part of an elaboration of possibilities for the future.

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