

## Gender-based violence in *Things Fall Apart*

By

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### Abstract

*A cursory reading of Things Falls Apart has resulted in some analysts labelling this novel sexist. The main purpose of this article is to argue that, on the contrary, a close reading of Things Fall Apart shows that women are depicted as revered stakeholders with significant religious, economic, cultural, and political roles. This is despite the patrilineal and patriarchal stratification of the traditional pre-colonial and colonial village life portrayed in this novel. The feminine principle is in firm control of the entire social fabric. Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves is undoubtedly the most potent god, but he is only a messenger of Ani, the Earth Goddess, the owner of the land, and the ultimate judge of all morality. Chika and Chielo, Agbala's priestesses, are also immensely powerful women. Okonkwo, the flawed hero of the novel, is a conceited, single-minded man whose excesses do not represent Igbo values. The crimes he commits are most offensive to Ani. Things Fall Apart is thus exonerated from being sexist.*

**Key Words:** Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, close reading, gender-based violence, sexism

### Introduction

Cobham (2009, pp. 510 – 511) recounts an incident that once occurred in a literature lesson where one student is said to have burst out: 'This is a sexist novel!' Efforts by the lecturer to explain that this is not the case proved fruitless. In the end,

the class had degenerated into a slanging match between those who felt texts like *Things Fall Apart* should be expurgated from the syllabus, and those who wanted to tell the censorship group what they would like Okonkwo to do to them if he were a member of the class.

The indictment of *Things Fall Apart* as a sexist novel could be attributed to what Achebe calls 'colonialist criticism' (Achebe, 1988, pp. 46 – 61). This is the kind of criticism where the 'colonialist' mindset says since the novel is set in the past, it is about 'Africa's

mindless, inglorious times. On the contrary, the opposite is true: Achebe intends to demonstrate that Europe did not bring ‘civilization’ to ‘savages’ (Wren, 2009, p. 528).

No full understanding of a literary text is possible without a thorough analysis of its context. Jeffares (2010, p. x) affirms this point:

The study of literature requires knowledge of contexts as well as of texts.

What kind of person wrote the poem, the play, the novel, the essay? What was the historical, political, philosophical, economic, the cultural background? Was the writer accepting or rejecting the literary conventions of the time, developing them, or creating entirely new kinds of literary expressions? ... Such questions stress the need for students to go beyond the reading of set texts, to extend their knowledge by developing a sense of chronology, of action and reaction, and the varying relationships between writers and society.

Accordingly, this introductory section of the article provides what Belcher (2009, p. 180) refers to as a vivid context, answering the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘where’, and ‘when’ questions regarding, firstly, the Research Design and Methodology of this article, and secondly regarding Chinua Achebe himself, and *Things Fall Apart*, his first novel, and for which he is most highly regarded.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The design classification of this article is textual analysis. As stated in the abstract, the main purpose of the paper is to subject *Things Fall Apart* to thorough analysis in order to understand the meaning of this text. Naturally, this literary analysis is hermeneutical, and Close Reading will inform the interpretation of the novel.

## Close Reading

It is worth noting that there is no critical appreciation without close reading, really. But in this article, Close Reading should be understood to be an offshoot of New Criticism as propounded by exponents such as Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate who argue, quite convincingly, that literature contains universal truths that can only be extracted by a close analysis of its literary language (Dowling, 2006, p. 19). Notwithstanding the fact that historically New Criticism, having been birthed by formalist predecessors such as Russian Formalism, focused on poetry, there is no denying the fact that literary theory is a pluralistic discipline. As such, the close reading that the founders of New Criticism wanted to be applied only to poetry will be applied to the novel, *Things Fall Apart*. Therefore, close reading must be understood to mean the type of reading that is undertaken by what Emenyonu calls the perceptive reader (Rutherford and Petersen, 2009, p. 87). It is only through close reading that one will notice typographical mistakes such as writing 'bear', instead of 'hear' in the second line of 'The Second Coming in the 1958 and subsequent editions of *Things Fall Apart*: 'The falcon cannot **bear** the falconer', instead of 'The falcon cannot **hear** the falconer'. It is only through close reading that one can spot mistakes made by some critics such as Cobham who wrongly spell some Igbo names; Cobham talks of Enzima, instead of Ezinma. Again, Cobham fails to distinguish between Chielo and Agbala (Cobham, 2009, pp. 517, 519). It is these kinds of mistakes that lead to a misinterpretation of *Things Fall Apart*.

Close reading is differentiated from reading for pleasure; instead, it is synonymous with study reading, which is variously known as critical, or interactive reading and demands scrutiny (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, 2005, p. 25). In study reading, one reads slowly and carefully. One reads to understand, remember, and be critical. Close reading requires that the reader interacts with the text. One reads with a pencil in one's hand, and occasionally takes notes, highlighting certain aspects in the text that must be revisited or that need further attention (Cleary, 2010, p. 65).

## Research Questions

Who is Chinua Achebe?

Why did he decide to become a writer, and why did he write *Things Fall Apart*?

What have other literary artists and critics said about Chinua Achebe?

What value does this article add to Literary Criticism?

## Chinua Achebe and *Things Fall Apart*

Arguably Nigeria's best-known novelist and probably the most famous creative literary artist from black Africa (Killam, 1969, p. 1), Chinua Achebe was born on 16 November 1930 in Ogidi, some miles to the north-east of Onitsha. He was baptized as Albert Chinualumogu, but later dropped 'Albert', and also decided to cut his other name into two, keeping only the first part, 'Chinua'. Achebe himself explains that 'Chinualumogu' was just too long, and he had to shorten it to 'Chinua' to make it more businesslike, without, he hoped, losing the general drift of its meaning, since, among the Igbo, names are philosophical statements, (Achebe, 1988, p. 22). The point about the meanings of Igbo names is also mentioned in *No Longer at Ease* during a conversation between Obi and John, a young white man Obi has just met onboard a boat back home to Nigeria after finishing his studies in England. John says he has been told that all African names mean something, to which Obi says, 'Well, I don't know about *African* names – Ibo names, yes. They are often long sentences. Like that Prophet in the Bible who called his son, the Remnant Shall Return,' (Achebe, 1960, p.23).

Achebe's father was a church agent, which meant that he taught at the mission school on weekdays and was responsible for the village church at the same time. The Achebe children attended this mission school from which Achebe gained admission to Government College, in 1944. He then joined University College, Ibadan, where he graduated after studying English, History, and Religious Studies. After graduation, he joined the Nigerian Broadcasting Service, where he eventually became the Director of

External Services. His marriage was blessed with four children, and over the years Achebe travelled extensively all over the world (Achebe, 1958, p. vii).

Primarily a novelist, Achebe was also a short story writer, a poet, a literary theorist and critic, a university lecturer and professor, an editor, a politician, and a social commentator. One could say he was everything a person could be in literature, except a playwright.

Achebe's fame rests mainly on his achievements as a novelist, especially on account of *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which was followed by four other novels, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966) and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987).

His childhood fiction includes *Chike and the River* (1966), *How the Leopard Got His Claws* (1972), *The Flute* (1975), and *The Drum* (1978).

As a short story writer, Achebe published *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1962), *The Insider: Stories of Peace and War from Nigeria* (1971), and *Girls at War and Other Stories* (1973).

*Beware, Soul Brother and Other Poems* (1971), *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems* (1971), *Don't Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo* (1978), *Aka Weta: An Anthology of Igbo Poetry* (1982), *Another Africa* (1998) and *Collected Poems* (2005) is Achebe's poetry anthologies.

Achebe's literary eclecticism is further demonstrated in his polemical works, in which he emerges not just as a literary critic, but also as an uncompromising social commentator. Some of his essays on various topics have appeared in publications such as *Morning Yet On Creation Day* (1975), *An Image of Africa and The Trouble With Nigeria* (1977), *Hopes and Impediments* (1988), *Beyond Hunger in Africa: Conventional Wisdom and an African Vision* (1991), *Home and Exile* (2000), and *The Education of a British-Protected Child* (2009).

Achebe's memoir, *There Was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra* was published in 2012, a few months before his unexpected death on March 21, 2013.

Achebe's political views are discernible from reading some of his polemical texts, and in some instances, he is as forthright as possible; for example, when he states:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. ... The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are hallmarks of true leadership. (Achebe, 1983, p. 1)

His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, was published when many African countries were still under colonial rule, and in 1964, this novel became the first text by an African writer to be included in the syllabus for African secondary schools throughout the English-speaking parts of Africa (except South Africa) (Walder, 1999, p. 11). Since its publication in 1958, *Things Fall Apart* has sold millions of copies, and it has been translated into several languages, German, Italian, Spanish, Slovene, Hebrew, French, Czech, and Hungarian. In 2002, *Things Fall Apart* came top of the list of Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (ZIBF, 2002).

The three words which form the title of the novel, 'Things fall apart' are taken from Line 3 of W. B. Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming':

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi  
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert  
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.  
The darkness drops again, but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

'The Second Coming' is a 22-line poem that takes a dim view of the future. Yeats' focus is Europe, with its tradition of Christian civilization that has stretched two thousand years. This civilization is now collapsing, and the poem's prophecy is that this Christian civilization is to be replaced by something that does not even have a name (Stock, 2009, p. 260).

Achebe is not interested in the prophecy, nor is he primarily concerned about Europe; instead he sees things from the standpoint of Umuofia, to whom the western world is the 'shape with lion body and the head of a man' (Line 14), the 'rough beast' (Line 21), (Stock, 2009, p. 260).

In the novel itself, it is Obierika, Okonkwo's long-time friend and 'the voice of reason and sobriety' (Obiechina, 2009, p. 522) who uses words that echo the title of the novel when he sums up the situation soon after Okonkwo's return to Umuofia from seven years' exile in Mbanta; the white man has divided the clan which can no longer act like one.

'Does the white man understand our custom about land?'

'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad, and our brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably 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, pp. 124 – 125).

In simple terms, Achebe's novel is a fictive account of the breakdown of traditional Igbo society under the weight of European colonialism.

There are many occasions when Achebe has explained why he decided to become a writer, and specifically why he decided to write *Things Fall Apart*. It is easy to understand

his theory of literature, which can be said to have its roots in Classical Literary Theory. Plato's philosophy of life – the common good – is espoused in his treatise *The Republic*. According to Plato, literature must serve society, even if it means that it should be heavily censored, starting with stories for the young, whose age makes them easy to manipulate. [Child minders] must be persuaded to tell only stories that have a good formative influence on the children. ... That is why every care has to be taken that the first stories should be about the noblest things, and should be such as to encourage them in virtuous ways. (Boyd, 1962, pp. 39 – 40)

Plato's theory of literature has been adopted by many literary personalities, stretching as far back as four centuries ago. These include neo-classic literary icons such as Dr. Johnson, who has been conflated with the dictum 'literature serves a pragmatic purpose: to teach by delighting,' (Gray, 1984, p. 58). Achebe is a firm believer in the utilitarian value of literature, and he 'has articulated the responsibility of the writer as an essentially pedagogical one in which the writer, in addition to writing about the issues of his day also has to assume the role of "teacher" and guardian of his society,' (Amuta, 1989, p. 114).

In the early 1970s, Achebe categorically stated: 'Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorized dog-shit,' (1971, p. 80). And shortly after that, he announced that although he was quite prepared to modify his language, he would

still insist that art is, and was always, in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight); they made their sculptors in wood and terra-cotta, stone, and bronze to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society and created their works for the good of that society. (Achebe, 1973, p. 617)

It is clear, therefore, that for Achebe literature must serve society. Interestingly, Achebe is not the only literary artist to articulate such thinking: Soyinka, as far back as the mid-1970s once talked of one of the social functions of literature: 'the visionary reconstruction

of the past for the purposes of a social direction,' (Soyinka, 1976, p. 106). And then, in the early 1990s, Soyinka castigated African writers for doing nothing to condemn human failures and declared:

It seems to me that the time has now come when the African writer must now have the courage to determine what alone can be salvaged from the current cycle of human stupidity. ... [The African writer must act] as the record of mores and experience of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time. (Soyinka, 1993, pp. 20 – 21)

Ngara corroborates the above-mentioned stance:

Literature, theatre, and cinema have an important role to play ... because art shapes and sharpens our consciousness and our perception of the world around us. ... Writers are cultural workers and as such one of their functions is to help in the building of a democratic culture. (Petersen, 1988, p. 137)

And finally, for the purposes of this article, Ngugi wa Thiong'o also shares the same sentiments, and even goes to the extent of declaring that every writer is a writer in politics, (1997, p. xvi). His stance is based on the premise that there is a strong link between literature and society. Ngugi firmly believes that literature results from conscious acts of men and women in society, and that literature is a product of people's intellectual and imaginative activity; it is thoroughly social. Ultimately, Ngugi argues, 'A writer after all comes from a particular class, gender, race, and nation. ... A writer tries to persuade his readers, to make them not only view a certain reality but also from a certain angle of vision,' (Ngugi, 1997, p. 4).

Some critics believe that African literature emerged out of the need to counter early European texts that depict the African as a creature devoid of any dignity (Lunga, 2012, p. 3). Achebe has always argued that Africans should not expect other people to tell their (Africans') stories.

The telling of the story of black people in our time, and for a considerable period before, has been the self-appointed responsibility of white people, and they have mostly done it to suit a white purpose, naturally. That must change, and is indeed beginning to change, but not without resistance or even hostility. So much psychological, political, and economic interest is vested in the negative image. The reason is simple. If you are going to enslave or colonize somebody, you are not going to write a glowing report about him either before or after. Rather you will uncover or invent terrible stories about him so that your act of brigandage will become easy for you to live with. (Achebe, 2009, p. 61)

The above quotation explains why Achebe decided to be not only a writer but also why he decided to write *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe first explains that while in secondary school he and his counterparts read books that had nothing to do with Africa but had everything to do with England ... *Treasure Island, Tom Brown's School Days, The Prisoner of Zenda, David Copperfield, etc.*

These books were not about us, or people like us. Even stories like John Buchan's, in which heroic white men battled and worsted repulsive natives, did not trouble us unduly at first. But it all added up to a wonderful preparation for the day we would be old enough to read between the lines and ask questions. (Achebe, 2009, p. 21)

This means that while he was still mentally young, Achebe saw nothing wrong with the literature that he was reading. He says that even when he read books by Buchan and Haggard, where Africans are depicted in a bad light, he did not see himself as an African. 'I took sides with the white men against the savages. ... The white man was good and reasonable and intelligent and courageous. The savages arrayed against him were sinister and stupid or, at the most, cunning,' (Achebe, 1990, p. 7).

But after maturing mentally, Achebe realized that 'stories are not innocent; that they can be used to put you in the wrong crowd, in the party of the man who has come to dispossess you,' (Achebe, 1990, p. 7). Again, in his own words, Achebe states:

At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa (including Joyce Carey's much-praised *Mister Johnson*) and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned. Although I did not set about it consciously in that solemn way, I now know that my first book, *Things Fall Apart*, was an act of atonement for my past, the ritual return, and homage of a prodigal son. (Achebe, 1988, p. 25)

Clearly, then, Achebe's main reason for writing books such as *Things Fall Apart* was to correct the bad image of Africa and Africans that had been propagated by European colonial racist literature that tended to concentrate only on the negative aspects of Africa and Africans. That is why Achebe's writing is said to be didactic; it is designed to teach readers something that they did not know. Asked why he wrote *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe's reply was: 'to set the record straight about my ancestors,' (Achebe, 1988, p. 26).

Achebe unequivocally states his views on the educative role of a writer in an essay that was published as far back as 1965, 'The Novelist as a Teacher'. These are his words:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all ... the sensitive point of his community. ... I for one would not wish to be excused. I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past – *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans, acting on God's behalf, delivered them. (Achebe, 1965, p. 30)

Achebe's reasons for becoming a writer in general, and in particular for writing *Things Fall Apart* can be summed up in his famous quotations. Firstly, he wanted 'to help [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement,' (Achebe, 1965, p. 29). Secondly, he wanted to prove that

African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. (Achebe, 1973, p. 8)

Achebe, therefore, believes that art must interpret all human experiences, (Achebe, 1988, p. 44), and that good art should aim to change things, (2009, p. 2009).

Having provided the context to *Things Fall Apart*, in which an attempt was made to answer questions such as who wrote the novel, why, what the novel is about, the setting of the novel, among other things, the article now moves on to produce evidence that supports the argument that this novel is neither sexist nor misogynist. Readers must bear in mind, all the time, that the key motivation for producing African literature, in general, was to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of the Africans in the age of decolonization (Gikandi, 2007, p. 56). In other words, if critics start looking for phenomena such as gender issues in *Things Fall Apart*, as we understand these topics in the modern, western, sophisticated urban industrialized world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, critics are bound to come up with an interpretation that the author never had in mind. This is the interpretation that Cobham foists on *Things Fall Apart* (Cobham, 2009, pp. 518 – 520). This kind of interpretation is anachronistic. *Things Fall Apart* should be read with an understanding and appreciation of its time and place (Wren, 2009, p. 528), late 19<sup>th</sup>-century pre-colonial and colonial rural Igboland, when man/woman dynamics were so different from what they are like today, even among the Igbo themselves.

### **Textual Analysis:** Patriarchy in *Things Fall Apart*

It is not in dispute that the pre-colonial and colonial traditional life depicted throughout *Things Fall Apart* is both patrilineal and patriarchal. Among the Igbo, a person's lineage is traced through the person's male descendants. Early in the novel, some clansmen engage in a leisurely discussion in which they compare their customs with those of their

neighbours. Someone remarks that what is good in one place is bad in another place, and Okonkwo himself acknowledges that the world is large (Achebe, 1958, p. 51). However, it is unimaginable for Okonkwo and those who think like him that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family. Such a situation, according to a participant in the discussion, is as good as saying that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children.

The patrilineal nature of their society is clearly explained by Okonkwo's uncle, Uchendu, when he says, 'A child belongs to its father and his family and not its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 94). As one of the respected elders among his people, Uchendu's explanation ought to be taken seriously. He is speaking on behalf of the entire community. Having clarified the patrilineality of his Igbo people, Uchendu also acknowledges the fact that societies differ. In his words, 'The world has no end, and what is good among one people is an abomination with others,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 99).

The patrilineal nature of the Igbo society does not, nor should it in any way imply that women are inferior among the Igbo. Again, this comes out quite clearly when Okonkwo is in exile in Mbanta. On discovering that his nephew is full of sorrow because he has been forced to come and live in his motherland for a few years, his uncle, Uchendu, directly asks Okonkwo why, despite the patrilineal and patriarchal nature of their society, they give their children the name Nneka, which means 'Mother is supreme'.

When Okonkwo expresses ignorance, his uncle poses another question: 'Why is it that when a woman dies she is taken home to be buried with her kinsmen,' (Achebe, 1958, p.94)? When it becomes clear that nobody in the gathering knows why this is so, Uchendu explains:

A child indeed belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in his motherland. Your

mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. That is why we say the mother is supreme. (Achebe, 1958, p. 94)

Uchendu's explanation makes it crystal clear that the patrilineal nature of their society does not relegate women to an inferior status. His explanation brings out the connotative meaning of the word 'mother', and in that way, he demonstrates that women are an integral part of everyone's life; they are needed for the softer side of people's lives; they represent the humane aspect which is characterized by gentleness, protection, care, warmth, and so forth.

It is worth noting that Igbo cosmology recognizes the contributions of women and men to be complementary (Jell-Bahlsen, 1998, p. 103). The Igbo live-and-let-live philosophy is enshrined in the proverb of the perching of the eagle and the hawk. According to Nwankwo (1998, p. 394), Igbo traditional society is a democratic haven; the retarded citizen and the village idiot enjoy equal speaking time and space with the high and mighty. There is mutual respect for all and sundry. According to Uchendu (2009, p. 234), the Igbo world is based on an equalitarian principle, what Achebe himself calls 'the fierce egalitarianism which was such a marked feature of Igbo political organization,' (Achebe, 2009, p. 164).

There is abundant evidence of the man/woman dialectic in *Things Fall Apart*. For example, only men are eligible to take titles; only men can be members of the *egwugwu*, the administrators of justice in the society (or masqueraders who impersonate ancestral spirits of the village). Yam is said to be the king of crops, a man's crop, and stands for manliness, whilst crops such as coco-yams, beans, and cassava are 'women's crops' (Achebe, 1958, p. 16, p. 23).

Okonkwo adopts this two-dimensional arrangement of Igbo society to satisfy his ego. Possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible life, Okonkwo makes it an act of faith to be 'ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of these things was gentleness and another was idleness,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 10). It is for

this reason that 'Okonkwo never show[s] any emotion openly unless it is the emotion of anger. To show emotion [is] a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating [is] strength,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 20). Okonkwo, therefore, imprisons himself in this veneer of a hard man, when in fact he has a soft side too, as exhibited in the wrestling match during the New Yam celebrations. When one of the wrestlers so expertly throws his opponent on his back, Okonkwo springs to his feet but quickly sits down again (Achebe, 1958, p. 34). During Ikemefuna's killing, Okonkwo looks away as the killer's machet is raised. Indeed, the narrator hints that perhaps deep down in his heart Okonkwo is not a cruel man.

And so, Okonkwo wants to inculcate 'manliness' in his eldest son, Nwoye, and he does this by being harsh towards him. For example, when Okonkwo is preparing his seed yams, he (Okonkwo) always finds fault with Nwoye's effort, and so threatens to break his jaw, reminding him that he (Nwoye) is no longer a child and that he (Okonkwo) began to own a farm at Nwoye's age. Ikemefuna too receives the same harsh treatment.

The narrator indicates that Okonkwo knows that what he is doing and saying to the boys is unfair because they are still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed yams. However, Okonkwo explains that he wants his son to grow into a 'real man', one who in the fulness of time '[will] be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man [is], if he [is] unable to rule his women and his children (and especially his women) he [is] not really a man,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 37).

Nwoye therefore soon learns that it is right to be masculine and violent and that it serves him well to appear to be growing into the 'man' his father wants him to become. To that end, he relishes the prospect of being sent to do 'one of those difficult and masculine tasks in the home, like splitting wood, or pounding food,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 37). The indoctrination sessions into Okonkwo's version of patriarchy mean that Nwoye must sit in Okonkwo's *obi*, listening to 'stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 37). But inwardly, Nwoye still prefers the stories of tortoise and his wily ways, what Okonkwo now calls stories for 'foolish women and children ...And

so, [Nwoye] feigns that he no longer cares for women's stories,' (Achebe, 1958, pp. 37 - 38).

It is only a matter of time before the deep difference in temperament between the father and son leads to a split when the latter leaves the former to join the new religion. Nwoye is by nature very gentle, like his grandfather, Unoka. Predictably, Okonkwo will not accept that, and so he moans throughout the novel that Ezinma should have been a boy (Achebe, 1958, pp. 44, 45, 46, 122). He unfairly compares Nwoye, who is still only twelve, to Maduka, Obierika's sixteen-year-old son.

If I had a son like him, I should be happy. I am worried about Nwoye. A bowl of pounded yam can throw him in a wrestling match. His two younger brothers are more promising. ... If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit. ... I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him. (Achebe, 1958, p. 46)

It should be obvious by now that Okonkwo's understanding of 'manliness' is warped, and differs from that of other people, including even that of his best friend, Obierika. To Okonkwo, showing affection to someone, your spouse or child, is a sign of weakness; it is 'unmanly'. But to other people such as the revered Ogbuefi Ezeudu and Obierika, it is unthinkable for a man to kill his son, no matter the circumstances. That is why Ezeudu warns Okonkwo to have no hand in the killing of Ikemefuna.

That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death. ... They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father. (Achebe, 1958, p. 40)

And true enough, the last words from Ikemefuna are, 'My father, they have killed me!' as he runs towards Okonkwo. Dazed with fear, and afraid of being thought weak, Okonkwo cuts him down (Achebe, 1958, p. 43).

The fact that Okonkwo can neither eat any food nor sleep for two days after killing Ikemefuna is a clear testimony that his manliness is fake. Ikemefuna's death has a devastating effect on him, as the narrator graphically states: 'He trie[s] not to think about Ikemefuna, but the more he trie[s] the more he [thinks] about him. ... [H]e is so weak that his legs [can] hardly carry him. He [feels] like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 44).

The conversation with Obierika in which Okonkwo tries to exonerate his troubled conscience should send a clear signal to Okonkwo that he has overstepped the mark, that he has transgressed. Once again, the narrator states, with a touch of sarcasm, how Okonkwo expels the thought of his father's weakness and failure by thinking about his strength and success, and his mind goes to his latest show of manliness (Achebe, 1958, p. 46). As a true friend, Obierika sends a chilling warning to Okonkwo, this after dismissing Okonkwo's explanation for participating in the killing of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo explains that he was merely following the orders of the Oracle, but Obierika rebuffs that argument by showing Okonkwo that killing Ikemefuna was as good as killing his son. '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,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 46).

Clearly, Okonkwo lives in his own world, because to him even the display of affection between Ogbuefi Ndulue and his wife Ozoemena is a sign that Ndulue was a weak man. Ndulue and Ozoemena die of old age within minutes of each other, and it is said that during his entire married life, Ndulue could not do anything without consulting his wife. Okonkwo takes this to be a sign of weakness, but first, Ofoedu says Ndulue was a strong man in his youth, and then Obierika follows up with a further compliment that indeed Ndulue was a brave man who even led Umuofia to war in his youth.

It should be clear by now that Okonkwo completely misunderstands his society's values, especially as they apply to gender issues. Igbo society is certainly patrilineal and patriarchal, but it is not anti-woman; it is not sexist. Okonkwo's 'monochromatic view' of what it takes to be a man determines his actions and attitudes (Iyasere, 2009, p.380). It

is this one-sided concept of his society that sets Okonkwo on a collision course with everybody. Ultimately his warped view drives a wedge between him and his society and makes him commit violent acts against his family, against his society, and finally against himself.

**Textual Analysis:** Gender-based Violence in *Things Fall Apart*

Okonkwo's conceptualization of manliness, it should be born in mind, stems from his abhorrence of his father, Unoka's weakness and failure in life. As a little boy, Okonkwo was deeply hurt when a playmate told him that his father was *agbala*. Okonkwo learnt for the first time that '*agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 10). This incident shapes, and sharpens Okonkwo's psyche, and drives him to be the uncompromising, inflexible character who must 'never [show] any emotion openly, unless it is the emotion of anger. To show affection [is] a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating [is] strength,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 20).

Okonkwo is an abusive husband and father, as the narrator states: 'Okonkwo rule[s] his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, [live] in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so [do] his little children,' (Achebe, 1958, p.9). On the first day of Ikemefuna's arrival at Okonkwo's home, his most senior wife to whom the boy has been handed over asks whether the lad will be staying with the family for long. Instead of a simple 'Yes' or 'No', Okonkwo thunders, 'Do what you are told, woman. ... When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia,' (Achebe, 1958, pp. 10 – 11)? This type of response from Okonkwo is hurtful to his wife, not least because she is the most senior wife and deserves to be treated more respectfully than anybody in the household; he humiliates her in front of everybody, including the new arrival. This is verbal abuse, and it is psychologically damaging to the recipient. Nothing in the senior wife's question suggests disobedience to her husband, or that she is questioning the wisdom of the *ndichie* of Umuofia. It is worth noting that Okonkwo's reaction is nuanced with sexism. Okonkwo wants everyone to understand that as a woman, his wife should not exchange

words with him, a man. To Okonkwo, such behaviour from a woman is a sign of disrespect to him, the lord of the household. Secondly, as a woman, she should not even think of questioning the decision of the *ndichie* (elders,) of Umuofia. These elders are men, not women, and their decisions must not be questioned, least of all by a woman. But there is nothing really in the senior wife's words that justify Okonkwo's angry reaction. She has asked a simple, straightforward question that requires a simple, straightforward answer. Instead, the most senior wife is verbally abused. It hurts.

Okonkwo's humiliation of his most senior wife is juxtaposed with Nwakibie's dignified treatment of his own senior wife (in a flashback). Anasi is the first of Nwakibie's nine wives, and during the occasion when Okonkwo has come to borrow seed yams from Nwakibie, there is some wine-drinking that must take place. The men drink first, and when the turn for the women to partake in the drinking comes, the junior wives cannot drink before Anasi. The narrator introduces Anasi as tall and strongly built. There [is] authority in her bearing and she [looks] every inch the ruler of the womenfolk in [this] large and prosperous family, (Achebe, 1958, p. 14 -15). After Anasi has drunk a little, she rises, calls her husband by his name, and then goes back to her hut. The other wives then partake in the drinking, 'in their proper order,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 15).

As if the unkind words directed at the most senior wife (Nwoye's mother) are not enough to cause emotional trauma, she experiences vicarious suffering each time any member of the family is tormented by Okonkwo. The 'constant nagging and beating' of Nwoye by Okonkwo, which results in Nwoye 'developing into a sad-faced youth' (Achebe, 1958, p. 10) is undoubtedly traumatic for the boy himself as he experiences both physical and emotional pain, but it must be even more emotionally unbearable for Nwoye's mother. As soon as Ikemefuna joins the family, Nwoye's mother is very kind to him and treats him as one of her own children. On hearing that Ikemefuna will not eat any food, Okonkwo comes along, with a big stick in his hand, and forces Ikemefuna to swallow his yams, trembling. Afterward, the boy vomits all the food, painfully. The effect of the cruel treatment that Okonkwo metes towards Ikemefuna in this incident is transferred to Nwoye's mother, but

all she can do is suffer in silence. She tries to console Ikemefuna by placing her hands on his chest and on his back.

When Okonkwo breaks the Week of Peace by beating Ojiugo, his youngest wife, for not preparing his afternoon meal, again the other two senior wives also experience abuse, but to them, it is emotional abuse, whereas Ojiugo undergoes both emotional and physical abuse. Any reasonable person would excuse Ojiugo for not preparing Okonkwo's afternoon meal. She is still young, after all, and is still learning the ropes, as it were. It is not as if Okonkwo will not have anything to eat for lunch, because the other two wives will certainly prepare something for him and Ojiugo's children. A strong warning to the 'erring' wife should suffice. But Okonkwo beats Ojiugoso heavily that she cries, in the process drawing the attention of neighbours, some of whom come to see for themselves what is happening.

When it comes to wife-battering, there are no sacred cows as far as Okonkwo is concerned. The turn for him to abuse Ekwefi, his second wife, comes during the New Yam Festival. As in the cases involving the other two wives, the reason for the abuse is flimsy. This time, Okonkwo has been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger. He accuses Ekwefi of killing a banana tree. The narrator makes it clear that as a matter of fact the tree is very much alive. Ekwefi has merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food. For this offence, Okonkwo gives her 'a sound beating', leaving her and her only daughter weeping, (Achebe, 1958, p. 27). For good measure, Okonkwo aims his loaded gun at Ekwefi and presses the trigger after hearing her murmur something about guns that never shoot. Fortunately, he misses her.

It is worth noting, once again, that while for the main target of abuse, Ekwefi this time, the abuse is both physical and emotional, for the other members of the family, the abuse is emotional. Ekwefi's only daughter, Ezinma weeps, not because she too has been soundly beaten. She feels the pain vicariously. She is emotionally hurt. The other two wives too empathise with their colleague and plead with Okonkwo to stop beating her. Of course, they do all this from a safe distance, in case they are caught in the crossfire. The loud,

explosive sound of the gun sets the entire family wailing. A more frightening example of an abusive husband and father cannot be found.

Ekwefi, it should be remembered, has suffered much in her life, having borne ten children, nine of whom have died in infancy. Ezinma, *an ogbanje*, is now ten years old, but it is not clear whether she has come to stay forever or not. It is for this reason that one would expect Okonkwo to treat Ekwefi and Ezinma differently from the way he treats other members of his household. 'Ezinma' means 'My compound (or household) is beautiful'. Ezinma's beauty and affection, which the diminutive suffix 'nma' connotes are extended to her entire family (Irele, 2009, p. 25). Despite all this, Okonkwo does not treat Ekwefi and Ezinma differently. When a medicine-man comes to dig up Ezinma's *iji-uwa*, Okonkwo displays his gift for violence with words. He roars at Ezinma, threatens to beat sense into her, and even goes to the extent of insulting her: 'And why did you not say so, you wicked daughter of Akalogoli,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 58)?

During the preparation of the medicine to be used in the treatment of Ezinma when she is down with *iba*, Okonkwo also verbally abuses Ekwefi. As she receives instructions from Okonkwo who has selected the best ingredients from a large bundle of grasses, leaves, roots and barks of medicinal trees and shrubs, and after pouring some water in the pot, she asks whether the amount she has poured is enough.

"A little more ... I said *a little*. Are you deaf?" Okonkwo [roars] at her, (Achebe, 1958, p. 60).

As in the incident with the senior wife, this is yet another example of gender-based violence by Okonkwo on both his wife Ekwefi and his daughter, Ezinma. Roaring at Ezinma, threatening to beat sense into her, and calling her 'wicked daughter of Akalogoli' must induce a sense of trauma in the ten-year-old girl. She must wonder in what way she is 'wicked' since she has not chosen to be an *ogbanje*. As for being called 'daughter of Akalogoli', Ezinma must be left wondering why her mother is called by such a pejorative epithet. ('Akalogoli' means 'good for nothing' (Irele, 2009, p.50)). Ekwefi, who

has all along thought of herself as Okonkwo's favourite, is now a 'good-for-nothing' wife. Okonkwo is an abusive husband, as nasty as they come.

Having been insulted as 'Akalogoli', Ekwefi endures further verbal abuse when she is accused of being deaf. Without a calibrated measuring instrument, how is she to gauge how much 'a little more' is? The rhetorical question 'Are you deaf?' obviously implies that Ekwefi is so dumb that she cannot follow simple instructions.

Okonkwo's abuse of his wives and children does not have the approval of his community, it must be noted. After hearing that Nwoye has been attending church meetings, he seizes a heavy stick and hits him with two or three savage blows. It takes his uncle Uchendu to stop Okonkwo, after reprimanding him, rhetorically asking, 'Are you mad?' (Achebe, 1958, p. 107).

Okonkwo is a member of the infamous (greatest of all time) team of abusive husbands in literary texts, such as Mr. Morel in Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, Mr Vlassov in Gorky's *Mother*, and Mr. Grimes in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, to mention only three examples. Mr Morel is a hard-drinking miner who is hated by his entire family for the simple reason that he is abusive to both his wife and children. On one occasion, when his sickly wife is highly expectant, he shuts her out of the house for more than three hours during a bitterly cold night. On another occasion he beats his wife, leaving her with a swollen and discoloured eye. During their numerous quarrels, he calls his wife names, such as 'liar', and 'you nasty little bitch', (Lawrence, 1913, pp. 66 – 67). All these things he does and says before his young children. Mikhail Vlassov behaves like Mr. Morel. His favourite epithet is 'son of a bitch', and he always calls his wife 'bitch'. Pelagea, his wife, narrates that her husband used to beat her as if it was not his wife he was beating. She has a scar on her forehead as a result of her husband's brutality, (Gorky, 1906, pp. 11, 25, 93). Mr. Gabriel Grimes, (note the irony in the forename), is a preacher and is called 'Reverend', or 'Deacon' by his fellow worshippers. He calls himself 'the Lord's anointed', (Baldwin, 1952, p. 252). It takes his sister, Florence, to undress Gabriel, when she tells him to his face that all his life, he has been masquerading as a holy man. During that

time, there is no one he has met whom he has not made 'to drink a cup of sorrow,' (Baldwin, 1952, p. 252). Those people include his wife and children. One time, in a fit of rage after being challenged by his wife during an altercation concerning their wayward son, 'with all his might, he [reaches] out and [slaps] her across the face. She [crumples] at once, hiding her face with one thin hand ...,' (Baldwin, 1952, p. 49). The same wayward son calls him a 'black bastard' because he cannot stand the way his mother has been treated by his father. At this point, Mr. Grimes unleashes further violence on his son, using a leather belt that falls with a whistling sound on the boy, again and again, (Baldwin, 1952, p. 50).

In *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo is in the same category as Uzowulu, the serial wife batterer whose case is heard by the *egwugwu*. Uzowulu is the complainant in the case. His in-laws came to his house, beat him up, and then took away his wife and children. According to Uzowulu, his wife's brothers have not been willing to return her bride price. The in-laws defend themselves by providing evidence that Uzowulu, their in-law, is a beast. For the past nine years, no single day has passed without him beating the woman. After carefully listening to both sides, the *egwugwu* decide that Uzowulu should go to his in-laws, apologise and beg his wife to return to him.

The most important lesson to be learnt from this case is that the law of the land forbids the beating of women. It is summed up in the words of Evil Forest, the leader of the *egwugwu*: 'It is not bravery when a man fights with a woman,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 66). It is not surprising that the same message is transmitted in a similar case in *Arrow of God*, a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, and in which the geographical setting is the same as that in the earlier novel. This time the verdict is passed by Ezeulu whose daughter has been a victim of physical abuse from a man who calls himself her husband. Before he concludes the matter, Ezeulu checks from his daughter whether she wants to return to her husband, and she says yes. Then Ezeulu closes the meeting with these words:

When she comes treat her well. It is not bravery for a man to beat his wife. I know a man and his wife must quarrel; there is no abomination in that. Even brothers and sisters from

the same womb do disagree; how much more do two strangers. No, you may quarrel, but let it not end in fighting. (Achebe, 1964, p. 63)

The fact that Okonkwo is an abusive father and wife batterer must not make readers conclude that Okonkwo represents all men. Achebe himself has categorically stated that Okonkwo is not 'Everyman'; he is not even Every-Igbo-Man (Achebe, 2009, p. 127). Okonkwo is Okonkwo, a man bound to violence. The tragedy of his life lies in his nurturing of what are warped ideas of manhood, and his failure to recognize that his society is based on an equalitarian principle (Uchendu, 2009, p. 234). Okonkwo's excessively warped expression of the male principle leads him to antagonize and repress the female principle, both at the social level against 'woman' and the spiritual level against Ani, the Earth Goddess (Traore, 1997, p. 51). In the end, the female principle prevails, and Okonkwo loses his fruitless battle against *agbala*.

**Textual Analysis:** The supremacy of women in *Things Fall Apart*

The pre-colonial and colonial Igbo society of *Things Fall Apart* shows that 'the male and female principles are bound by an operative notion of balance and complementarity,' (Traore, 1997, p. 53). In other words, there exists in the society the understanding that there is interdependence between the female and male clusters; neither group is dominant over the other, nor is the other inferior, despite the patriarchal stratification in the clan. This dialectic is based on Igbo ontology which recognized the fact that '[w]omen controlled certain spheres of community life, just as men controlled other spheres. Women were perceived to possess superior spiritual well-being and headed many of the traditional cults and shrines,' (Ohadike, 2009, p. 241).

This is the duality that Okonkwo attempts to subvert, but he fails dismally because he is waging a futile battle against a behemoth, a system that has been entrenched ever since the clan was founded. The tragedy is that Okonkwo is a conceited man; he knows the rules but he ignores them. He ignores advice from his best friend, Obierika, from deep

fountains of wisdom such as the revered Ogbuefi Ezeudu, and his uncle Uchendu. Achebe notes: 'The obvious curtailment of a man's power to walk alone and do as he will is provided by another force – the will of his community,' (Achebe, 2009, p. 164). Okonkwo sets himself up for ignominious failure.

One of the first incidents in this novel is the threat of a war between Umuofia with Mbaino. The entire clan is mobilized, and about ten thousand men gather to deliberate on the matter which concerns the murder of a **daughter** (my emphasis) of Umuofia at Mbaino. Mbaino must choose between the war on the one hand and on the other the offer of a young man and a virgin as compensation. The point to note from this case is this: Umuofia will not fold its arms when one of its citizens has been wronged, and this time it is a **female** (again, my emphasis) member of the society. The second point to note is that this **single** woman must be paid for by **two** people. The third point to note is the anger that the murder has engendered in the clan, and this anger is detectable in the words of the main speaker: 'Those sons of wild animals have dared to murder a daughter of Umuofia,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 8).

To Umuofians, then, an injury to one is an injury to all, regardless of sex. But this case serves to demonstrate the supremacy of women in Igbo culture. The main reason why the people of Mbaino opt for a peaceful settlement is that Umuofia is feared by all its neighbours because of its power in war and magic. The active principle in that medicine is an old woman, and the medicine itself is called *agadi-nwayi*, or old woman, (Achebe, 1958, p. 9). In simple terms, Umuofia's most potent war medicine is as old as the clan itself, and it is a woman.

As if the *agadi-nwayi* example is not illustrative enough of the supremacy of women in *Things Fall Apart*, the concept of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, further corroborates this idea. Just as the Ancient Greeks refer to Zeus as their supreme god, and Apollo as the prophetic god at Delphi, the traditional Igbo refer to Chukwu as their supreme god, and Agbala is the equivalent of Apollo. The mighty Agbala (Achebe, 1958,

p. 71) has many names – the owner of the future, the messenger of earth, the god who cut(s) a man down when his life (i)s sweetest to him (Achebe, 1958, p. 75).

A priestess, a greatly feared woman, full of the power of her god serves Agbala. During Okonkwo's boyhood, Chika was the priestess, and during his adulthood it is Chielo. According to Irele (2009, p. 12) 'Chika' is a variant form of 'Chukwuka', which means 'God is supreme', and 'Chielo', or 'Chinelo' means 'God is mindful of us. Agbala's priestess is also a prophetess who 'prophes[ies] when the spirit of her god [is] upon her,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 35).

Although Agbala is a very potent god, it should be noted that he is only a messenger of the Earth Goddess, Ani. Ani is the source of all fertility. Ani plays a greater part in the life of people than any other god. She is the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what is more, she is in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies have been committed to earth (Achebe, 1958, p. 26). She is the 'supreme expression of the female principle,' (Irele, 2009, p. 12). Ani is served by a male priest Ezeani.

Quite clearly, then, the female principle is in full control of the entire fabric of Igbo life, social, political, cultural, religious, and economic. It is this formidable labyrinthine that Okonkwo pits himself against: he hates anything '*agbala*', and in his warped conception of manliness commits sins that most offend the Earth Goddess. The first of these offences is the breaking of the Week of Peace when Okonkwo beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo. Although the narrator says, 'In his anger [Okonkwo] had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 21), it is clear that no one can absolve Okonkwo from committing this crime. Ezeani, the priest of the Earth Goddess, reprimands Okonkwo, accusing him of not showing respect for the clan's gods and ancestors. This is the first time in the novel that someone warns Okonkwo about the danger that he is courting: 'The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 22).

After insulting the Earth Goddess by breaking the Week of Peace, Okonkwo's next act of disrespect is during the Feast of the New Yam, an occasion for giving thanks to Aní, the source of all fertility. When everyone is in a festive mood, Okonkwo walks aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger. He soon finds an outlet to satisfy his anger by soundly beating his second wife for 'killing' a banana tree. For good measure, he aims a loaded gun and pulls the trigger, almost shooting his wife. Any reasonable person who respects the gods and the ancestral spirits would not behave the way Okonkwo does during this holy festival.

Not satisfied with insulting the Earth Goddess by breaking the Week of Peace and spoiling the mood of the New Yam Festival, Okonkwo turns a deaf ear to the advice from Ogbuefi Ezeudu. This is one of the oldest men in Umuofia, a great and fearless warrior in his time, and a highly respected man in all the clan. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced that Ikemefuna must be killed, but Ezeudu warns Okonkwo not to have anything to do with it, for the simple reason that Ikemefuna calls Okonkwo 'father'. Killing Ikemefuna would be as good as killing his son, and this would be breaking one of the rules of the clan. Indeed, Obierika belatedly tells Okonkwo: 'What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families,' (Achebe, 1958, p. 46).

Okonkwo's defiance of Ogbuefi Ezeudu is yet another act of misconduct that flies in the face of the Earth Goddess. It is in the funeral wake of the great Ezeudu that Okonkwo commits perhaps the worst offence against the Earth Goddess, shooting the dead man's sixteen-year-old son (inadvertently, though). The warning against taking part in the killing of Ikemefuna has earlier come to Okonkwo's mind. As if shedding Ikemefuna's blood was not bad enough, Okonkwo's killing of Ezeudu's son has no parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Nothing like this has ever happened (Achebe, 1958, p. 87). Okonkwo has committed a crime against the Earth Goddess by killing a clansman, and therefore he must flee from the land.

Obierika's warning that Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna was the kind of crime for which the Earth Goddess could wipe out whole families is fulfilled because early the next morning a large crowd of men storm Okonkwo's compound, set fire to his houses, kill his animals and destroy his barns. Okonkwo has broken so many of the rules of the clan and it must be remembered that the Earth Goddess is the ultimate judge of all morality and conduct. Okonkwo's greatest friend Obierika is among the warriors exacting the justice of the Earth Goddess. These men are merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo has polluted with the blood of a clansman, (Achebe, 1958, p. 87).

Once Okonkwo is exiled, he is finished as far as influencing events in the clan is concerned. By the time he returns to Umuofia after seven years in Mbanta, the clan has been fundamentally transformed. He cannot understand why Umuofia will not join him in a fight against the new dispensation, but his friend Obierika explains that it is too late; the white man has put a knife on what used to hold them together and things have fallen apart. After committing so many evils against the Earth Goddess throughout his life, Okonkwo still commits one for the last time – killing himself. Again, it takes his friend Obierika to explain to the District Commissioner why his clansmen cannot touch his body:

It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down because you are strangers. (Achebe, 1958, p. 147)

Such then is the end of Okonkwo, who is defeated, figuratively and literally by the '*agbada*' principle. It is for this reason that this article talks about the supremacy of women in *Things Fall Apart*.

**Summary:** How all subjects, discoveries, and arguments relate

Okonkwo chooses a code of conduct that contradicts the Umuofian unwritten constitution. He crafts a mindset that is based on his background, particularly his father's contemptible life and shameful death. Taking advantage of the clan's culture which says that a person

is judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father, Okonkwo strives to change the law of the land. According to him, because he has risen from dire poverty to be one of the lords of the clan, and because he is physically strong and warlike, anyone else who exhibits the opposite characteristics is a failure. He thus equates “*agbala*”, “*agadi-nwayi*”, ‘woman’, ‘the feminine force’ to weakness. Okonkwo’s reconstruction of the Umuofian way of life is warped, because, even if this is a patrilineal and patriarchal society, it recognizes the complementary role of the female structures in the society. Umuofian society does not relegate ‘woman’ to an inferior status. Using his ill-conceived conception of patriarchy, Okonkwo embarks on an orgy of crimes in which he demonstrates his ‘manliness’. In the process, he offends the most powerful custodian of Igbo culture, Ani, the Earth Goddess. She is the ultimate judge of all morality and conduct. Okonkwo’s tragic end is self-inflicted because he knows that his behaviour is based on extremism, and ‘all extremism is abhorrent to the Igbo sensibility (Achebe, 1988, p. 43). He is like a Supreme Court judge in modern society who knows all the laws of the land but still breaks them as and when he likes. His shameful death is thus unavoidable. The Earth Goddess, the ultimate judge of all morality and conduct, punishes him, deservedly, although this is sad.

**Conclusion:** Why these discoveries are fascinating, and why this article is a contribution to scholarly debate,

Thousands of critics have commented on *Things Fall Apart* since the novel was published in 1958. Over the years the focus of the analysis of the novel has been on various themes, mainly political, but certainly also socio-cultural. This time, the analysis approaches old evidence in a new way (Belcher, 2009, p.52). The evidence that has been produced in this article has always been in *Things Fall Apart*. Therefore, the article does not introduce new data. Instead, the article develops a new way of explaining the old data. This new way of analysis is close reading. Through this approach, the article concludes that even if Umuofian society is both patrilineal and patriarchal, Okonkwo’s ‘manliness’ is a distorted conception of Umuofian culture. He does not represent all Igbo men or all men for that matter. Umuofia does not condone gender-based violence. Moreover, even if Umuofian

society is built around the two gendered principles of Chukwu (the Sky God) and Ani (or Ala) the Earth Goddess which are complementary, it is the latter principle that is in firm control of Igbo society. After all, the earth is the mother of all crops, since she produces all the food that mankind eats (Traore, 2009, p. 54). This means that really, the female principle is supreme. The ultimate judge of all morality and conduct has the final say about everyone's life, including Okonkwo's.

Even as this article is being drafted, (May 2020) during the period of COVID19, 'gender-based violence' has been appearing regularly in news items in both the print and electronic media, especially in South Africa. The historical setting of *Things Fall Apart* is in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and we are in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This proves the timelessness of literature. It reminds us of one of Achebe's reasons why he decided to write *Things Fall Apart* – namely to set the record straight, to demonstrate that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, and that African people had dignity (Achebe, 1973, p. 8).

In recent years, there has been a frenzy about STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), particularly in the SADC region. Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, for example, went all out to establish universities of science and technology: BIUST (Botswana International University of Science and Technology), NUST (Namibia University of Science and Technology,) NUST (National University of Science and Technology in Zimbabwe), and so on. While no one doubts the importance of science and technology as engines of national development, one always felt that the Humanities and Social Sciences are being marginalized. Indeed, in Zimbabwe, there has been a move by powerful government officials to abolish the Department of Sociology at the country's universities.

Such a move ignores the important role Humanities and Social Sciences play in tackling societal challenges. In fact, such a move ignores the meaning of 'Humanities'. 'Humanities' is derived from 'Humanitas', a Latin word which means 'human nature, or 'the act of being a human being, as opposed to being other things, such as animals.' 'The Arts' are also known as 'Liberal Arts', wherein 'liberal' refers to the 'liberation' of the

human imagination from bonds of narrowness and ignorance. The study of subjects in the Humanities such as Literature should make one, among other things, humane. Literature helps people learn about human nature in all its manifestations. Literature is important for the full growth of human beings. It is no small consolation that Literature is one of the six Nobel Prizes awarded each year, alongside excellent achievements in Medicine, Physics, Chemistry, Economics and work towards World Peace (Lunga, 2014, p. 395). It is in this light that texts such as *Things Fall Apart* should be analysed. These literary texts grapple with serious, real-life issues, and these are issues that will be found in all societies, of all ages. STEM cannot address these kinds of challenges.

Achebe records an encounter he had with a white child in the United States of America, and this child had studied *Things Fall Apart* in his school. This white child told Achebe that Okonkwo was like his father. As if that was not enough, James Baldwin, one of the most distinguished African American literary icons also once said to Achebe, 'That book was about my father,' (Achebe, 2009, p. 127). Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* may be an autobiographical novel in which the brutal Gabriel Grimes is an African American version of Okonkwo.

Finally, *Things Fall Apart* is not a sexist novel. Evidence gathered from the text shows that Okonkwo is indeed both a sexist as well as a misogynist who is bent on crushing the 'agbala', 'agadi-nwayi'(woman) principle throughout his entire life. But the article has proved that Okonkwo does not represent all men, or every Igbo man for that matter. His attempt to subvert Umuofian culture ends in total failure because he loses the contest to the Earth Goddess, the ultimate judge of all morality and conduct.

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