# SEXUALISING CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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**Abstract**
The paper re-reads Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a sexually explicit novel. A deconstruction of the gaps, silences and the actions in the text shows the characters to be in a sexual lock where their significant actions have sexual undertones or are as a result of sexual pressure. Okonkwo's prowess as a warrior, his passion for achievement, and his interpersonal relationships with other characters, especially the minor characters, are not fully accounted for if his sex drive is removed from the equation. The novel is replete with sexual imageries that leave no doubt that Achebe wants to call attention to his deployment of sexuality in telling sub-stories in the text. Read from this angle, Achebe presents a protagonist who is destroyed by his uncontrollable sexual drive and not just his inability to cope with the incursion of westernisation into Umuofia.

## Introduction

Okonkwo and his society in *Things Fall Apart* have been the subject of many and varied discourses for fifty-five years now. Aigboje Higo in his introduction to *Things Fall Apart* says: 'Anger and fear are key words in trying to understand Okonkwo's role in *Things Fall Apart*' (vi). This may be true to an extent. But, because Higo overlooks the fact that Okonkwo's society is a highly sexualised one, he fails to recognise sexuality as a key word in understanding the protagonist, Okonkwo, and his society. And Higo is not the only one that keeps silent on the deployment of sex and sexuality in the telling of Okonkwo's story.

Linda Strong-Leek's reading of *Things Fall Apart* as a woman gives an insight into the other side of Okonkwo – the terrorist – and not the warrior, although she is quick to place Okonkwo within the context of his time, age, and society and also states that his personality does not raise eyebrows in his world. Polycarp Ikuenobe

interestingly classifies Okonkwo and Unoka in the same group as not achieving personhood in the African normative philosophical conception of personhood, while Obierika and Ezeudu are seen by him as achieving this. David I. Ker's insistence that Achebe's choice of title for *Things Fall Apart* is a response to 'the scenario of chaos caused by colonialism' (1) becomes faulted when placed beside Umelo Ojinmah whose work recognises Okonkwo's tragedy as caused by the struggle between individualism and communalism. Arthur Ravenscroft equally attributes Okonkwo's tragedy to his inability to accept the female principle which together with the male principle creates societal balance. Except for the types of Claire Counihan's work which brings in sexuality from the angle of biological sexual differentiation of male and female that helps in attending to the figure of the woman as a binary opposite of the man, sex is not given a magnified place in measuring the characters in *Things Fall Apart* or in weighing Okonkwo's society.

**Theoretical Framework**

Psychoanalysis in this paper is viewed as a 'deconstruction' of self, an inquiry into the recesses of a person's being to discover an identity or identities 'hidden' or not immediately accessible to that person. This hidden self dwells in the unconscious and is termed by Jacques Lacan in Barry as the 'kernel of our being' (113). While adapting psychoanalysis in this work as the deconstruction of self, Okonkwo, in a way, faults Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical concept of Oedipus complex: he hates his father surely but shows his love/attachment to the mother in a twisted annihilating way. So while the society in *Things Fall Apart* is deconstructed as being fuelled by their sexual energies, Okonkwo's twistedness in realising the Oedipus complex singles him out of his community as a misnomer and leads to his destruction.

**Sexualising in *Things Fall Apart***

Sex finds its way into the fabrics of every day existence of the people in the text. It is used to regulate tension, manage conflicts, teach moral lessons, illustrate day-to-day involvements, make general comments on life, terrorise, dispossess, and of course it is

enjoyed simply as sex. All through the text, examples abound to show Umuofia as sexually charged.

Nwakaibie's elder son, Igwelo, is expected to drink the dregs of the palmwine Okonkwo brings to solicit Nwakaibie's help. This is because the dregs were believed to enhance sexual performance and Igwelo has just taken a new wife. While the purpose of providing the palmwine is to establish Okonkwo's farming through the seedlings Nwakaibie would give him, everybody's mind is on the fact that: 'Igwelo had a job in hand because he had married his first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palmwine were supposed to be good for men who were going in to their wives' (15). Nobody frowns at or feels uncomfortable with the open discussion of Igwelo's sex life – it is a welcome discussion.

Why use a virgin to replace the wife of Ogbuefi Udo? Would her virginity bring back the dead woman killed by the Mbaino people? No. In simple sexual terms, her freshness is meant to compensate and console Ogbuefi Udo over his loss. He gets a fresh sex field to navigate as his consolation prize. Since Ikemefuna is a boy, he is declared Umuofia's public property, sexually useless to the grieving heterosexual Ogbuefi Udo. In the end he is offered up as the sacrificial lamb.

Akueke's description as she comes out to greet her suitor and his family is sexually suggestive, drawing almost lecherous looks: 'Her suitor and his relatives surveyed her young body with expert eyes as if to assure themselves that she was beautiful and ripe…. She wore a black necklace which hung down in three coils just above her full succulent breasts' (49). The latest marriage/bridal song in the village which the musicians sing for Akueke also has a sexual connotation:

'If I hold her hand
She says, 'Don't touch!'
If I hold her foot
She says, 'Don't touch!'
But when I hold her waist beads
She pretends not to know.' (83)

Patriarchal Umuofia finds the idea of matriarchy abominable and captures its outrage using a sex position:

'The world is large,' said Okonkwo. 'I have even heard that in some tribes a man's children belong to his wife and her family.'

'That cannot be,' said Machi. 'You might as well say that the woman lies on top of the man when they are making the children.' (51)

The described sex position is as abominable to the speaker and his listeners as the idea that generated it is unbelievable. But, why would the elders of Umuofia and the text generally find sexual correlates for actions and events that are important in the text if theirs is not a sexually charged society? When the nine *egwugwu* (ancestral spirits of the clan) appear in Chapter Ten to settle disputes, it is surprising that the first and only extensively recorded case they settle is that of wife battery. Uzowulu beats the wife, Mgbafo, on daily basis and she even miscarries on one occasion. Uzowulu's defence for this charge is: 'It is a lie. She miscarried after she had gone to sleep with her lover' (65). Evil Forest, the leader of the *egwugwu* silences Uzowulu and bores holes in his defence by asking: 'What kind of lover sleeps with a pregnant woman?' (65) The crowd's reaction to Evil Forest's interrogation – approbation – shows that the society draws a line on the kinds of sexual relationships, behaviours and practices that are permissible amongst the married and unmarried. Having sex with a pregnant woman is a taboo, especially if the sex partner is not the husband. The condition Mgbafo's brother, Odukwe, gives under which Uzowulu will be allowed to take back his wife is hinged on extreme sexual punishment – castration: '…if he ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him' (65). Although this evokes laughter from the crowd, everybody knew Odukwe was making a point on how severe the punishment they will mete out to Uzowulu would be. That a matter of this sexual nature is brought to the *egwugwu* to settle pins the importance of sex in Umuofia community.

Ojiugo does not cook Okonkwo's meal, abandons her children without food and overstays at a friend's making her hair. Okonkwo beats her up forgetting it is the Week of Peace. The greatest provocation a man could receive, for which he is not even permitted to desecrate the Week of peace, according to Ezeani, the priest of

the earth goddess whom Okonkwo has defied, is sexual: 'Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your *obi* and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her' (22). Thus, Ojiugo's offence is trivialised since it is not as great as being caught in the act of adultery.

The horror and tension of the night Chielo takes Ezinma to the shrine of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, dissipates as Ekwefi recollects her first sex with Okonkwo:

> She had married Anene because Okonkwo was too poor then to marry. Two years after her marriage to Anene she could bear it no longer and ran away to Okonkwo. It had been early in the morning. The moon was shining. She was going to the stream to fetch water. Okonkwo's house was on the way to the stream. She went in and knocked at his door and he came out. Even in those days he was not a man of many words. He just carried her into his bed and in the darkness began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth (76).

It appears from this excerpt that Umuofia applies a double standard and classifies some kinds of adultery differently from others. Nowhere in the text is Ekwefi's sexual relationship with Okonkwo looked down on or mentioned in negative terms. Simply, Ekwefi gets tired of her first husband and runs away to the second, a warrior/wrestling champion whose success has endeared him to the hearts of many. The general silence of the text on the ruined Ekwefi-Anene union or the measures taken to appease or compensate Anene for his loss appears to condone wife desertion. Nobody thinks of giving Anene a virgin to console him for his loss of Ekwefi (after all, he has also lost his wife like Ogbuefi Udo, even though Ekwefi still lives).

Obierika's first visit to Okonkwo in Mbanta transports Umuofia's sexual charge to Mbanta with the former's response to the time of setting out to Mbanta from Umuofia: 'We had meant to set out from my house before cock-crow,' said Obierika. 'But Nweke did not appear until it was quite light. Never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married a new wife.' (99) Okonkwo's reaction to this response is to assure Nweke that he has done well to marry a wife and he adds: 'I do not blame you for not

hearing the cock crow' (100). The only instance an Mbanta man makes a reference to genitals is not an erotic reference but an indication of an abomination: the converts that threaten to burn the shrines of the village were told by one of the priests to 'Go and burn your mothers' genitals' (110) and the converts are thoroughly beaten up.

The wrestling contest of the New Yam Festival is Ekwefi's occasion for recalling how Okonkwo stole her heart thirty years earlier by defeating Amalinze the cat in a wrestling contest. On the other side of Okonkwo's compound, the drumbeats of the wrestling dance provokes erotic feelings in Okonkwo: 'Okonkwo cleared his throat and moved his feet to the beat of the drums. It filled him with fire as it had always done from his youth. He trembled with the desire to conquer and subdue. It was like the desire for woman' (30). This excerpt is key to understanding Okonkwo: His renown as a warrior, his constant need, efforts, and desire to subdue and stamp out everything that opposes him is akin to and therefore rooted in the desire for a woman. The excerpt presents an Okonkwo who sees women as objects to be conquered and subdued. Yet, he *desires* them. It is his understanding of himself as the power broker whose duty it is to conquer and subdue that causes him to feminise all his challenges and all oppositions in order to comfortably place them in the position of women in his life – conquered and subdued. Because he has no titles or large barns, accrues heavy debts and eventually dies a shameful death (being left in the evil forest to die of the swelling in his stomach), Unoka, Okonkwo's father, does not have his respect, even though he is good at his flute and therefore is an artist.

Unoka is not the only source of Okonkwo's family grief. Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, is a source of despair to him because he sees femininity and Unoka's laziness in him. With Ikemefuna's presence in the house, Nwoye begins to feel and act grown up. Hence, the only times he pleases Okonkwo are when he feigns annoyance and grumbles about women and their troubles. This is usually on being called by his mother or another of his father's wives to do a difficult task like splitting wood or pounding food:

> Okonkwo was inwardly pleased at his son's development, and he knew it was due to Ikemefuna. He wanted Nwoye to grow into a tough young man capable of ruling his father's household when he was dead and gone to join the ancestors…. And so he was always happy when he heard him grumbling about women. That showed that in time he would be able to control his women-folk. No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man…. So Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi*, and he told them stories of the land – masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred the stories that his mother used to tell, and which she no doubt still told to her younger children – stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird… (37).

Nwoye's grooming on 'manliness' under his father's tutelage would have produced another terrorist like his father but, (un)fortunately Okonkwo confesses to Obierika: 'I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him' (46). Obierika and Okonkwo's thoughts counter the latter's confession: 'Too much of his grandfather' (46). Unoka has already been defined by Okonkwo as a woman, so it is the same thing, whether it is too much of Nwoye's mother or the grandfather in the boy that is responsible for his perceived weakness. But, is Nwoye really weak? Certainly, his love and preference for folktales and 'women's stories' count as something. He definitely, like his grandfather, leans towards the artistic and this has to be rated differently from the raw show of strength cherished by the likes of Okonkwo.

An anti-woman Okonkwo who trains Nwoye and Ikemefuna on the essentials of masculinity – controlling women – cannot figure out why or how Ogbuefi Ndulue could be counted amongst the strong men of Umuofia:

> 'It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind,' said Obierika. 'I remember when I was a young boy there was a song about them. He could not do anything without telling her.'

'I did not know that,' said Okonkwo. 'I thought he was a strong man in his youth.'

'He was indeed,' said Ofoedu.

Okonkwo shook his head doubtfully.

'He led Umuofia to war in those days,' said Obierika (47-48).

If Umuofia recognises Ogbuefi Ndulue as a strong warrior, then it can rightly be said that while the society extols violent masculinity, it equally extols and allows gentle femininity to co-exist with it, leaving the individual to make his/her choice on which side of the divide s/he wants to belong. Umelo Ojinmah recognises the pluralistic nature of this society which he describes as 'flexible and adaptable when necessary…accommodative' (13). It is this flexibility which David Carroll sees as making the society 'susceptible to outside influence, always ready to examine ideas' (16) that Okonkwo does not recognise to his undoing.

The only time Okonkwo has the luxury of showing anxiety is the night that Chielo takes Ezinma to Agbala's shrine, but, even this luxury is privately displayed:

> Okonkwo was also feeling tired and sleepy, for although nobody else knew it, he had not slept at all last night. He had felt very anxious but did not show it. when Ekwefi had followed the priestess, he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and manly interval to pass and then gone with his matchet to the shrine, where he thought they must be. It was only when he got there that it occurred to him that the priestess might have chosen to go round the villages first. Okonkwo had returned home and sat waiting. When he thought he had waited enough he again returned to the shrine. But the Hills and Caves were as silent as death. It was only on his fourth trip that he had found Ekwefi, and by then he had become gravely worried (78).

One wonders what Okonkwo's reactions would have been if it was Nwoye that Agbala came for. Ezinma is the child after his heart, the daughter he regrets that nature has not allowed to come as a son. Understanding Ezinma's position in Okonkwo's heart, one gets to know that Okonkwo is overtly disturbed if and when anything tampers with his clear cut perception of masculinity. His worry over Ezinma should not be mistaken for worry over momentary loss of

his daughter, but of his son, since he has already done a sex/gender inversion in his mind for Nwoye and Ezinma.

It is not for nothing that Umuofia is called '*Umuofia obodo dike*, 'the land of the brave'' (84) 'where men were bold and warlike' (115). Going by their name, they cannot but extol and encourage the deeds of the likes of Okonkwo. So long as Okonkwo was masculine, he remained in the land, but the moment he commits a female crime – inadvertently killing a clansman, Ezeudu's sixteen year old son – he flees Umuofia to Mbanta, his motherland. One could say that Okonkwo's cup was full – he had done enough of subduing and conquering of women and this crime against the Earth, a female goddess – was his limit. Nearly all his acquisitions, most of which enhanced his 'manliness', are lost in one night of destruction as the servants of the Earth goddess (his kinsmen) exact justice by 'cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman' (87). His exile becomes more significant in this light: he needs to undergo training on femininity, and where else but motherland is most suitable for the training.

Life in Mbanta differs markedly from that in Umuofia. It is in Mbanta that Achebe explores the powers of *umuada*, the daughters of a family. In Umuofia, the women exert physical energy almost like their men. Ekwefi scales a fence to escape Okonkwo's shot; Chielo carries Ezinma on her back and speeds round the nine villages without being fatigued; and the women chase and capture cows that escape from their sheds. But in Mbanta, *umuada* sits in judgement over new brides to certify and authenticate their virtuousness, and daughters sit as equals with sons as witnesses as Uchendu counsels Okonkwo to soft pedal on his grief over the being exiled. Uchendu weaves the kind of stories Okonkwo and Umuofia call women's stories – he uses the story of Mother Kite to tell Okonkwo and Obierika that silence is more revered than shouts. It is in Mbanta that Nwoye is captivated by the the whiteman's religion. His attraction is not the logic of the Trinity but the condemnation of this religion for the violence he finds disturbing – 'the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed' (104). His father's beating on learning that he has joined the new religion makes it very easy for Nwoye to

fully turn his back on all Okonkwo believes in and embrace the new religion totally.

Okonkwo merely studies but fails to learn the lessons on femininity in Mbanta. He does not stop at beating Nwoye, he moves on to inspire Mbanta to fight the white man and his converts for killing the royal python. But, Mbanta decides to ostracise the converts instead. Okonkwo is disappointed: 'This was a womanly clan he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia' (113). These are not enough. He calls together his other five sons, the youngest being just four years old, and addresses them:

> 'You have all seen the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now while I am alive so that I can curse him. If you turn against me when I am dead I will visit you and break your neck' (121-122).

Even while still on exile, Okonkwo has programmed himself to carry his violence to his grave and the spirit world. He hopes to wield his might from there on any of his sons that would err. And he does because the stigma of his suicide will live forever with his children and haunt them just like Unoka's perceived weakness haunts Okonkwo. Okonkwo's return to his fatherland is not as joyful as he had hoped. *Umuofia obodo dike* is gradually losing its masculinity and rapidly learning to be feminine. Okonkwo 'mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women (129). His joy returns momentarily when the *egwugwu* razes Enoch's house to the ground and pulls down the church to appease Mother of Spirits for her dead son – a spirit/masquerade that overzealous Enoch unmasked. The days in detention at the District Commissioner's headquarters drains Umuofia of whatever little fighting spirit that the *egwugwu* had lit up. Okika's speech at the clan's meeting should have given Okonkwo a hint that even the gods and ancestors of Umuofia are dancing to a new tune and are behaving differently: 'All our gods are weeping. Idemili is weeping. Ogwugwu is weeping. Agbala is weeping, and all the others. Our dead fathers are weeping because

of the shameful sacrilege they are suffering and the abomination we have all seen with our eyes' (143). Before Okonkwo's exile, the gods and ancestors of Umuofia would get angry at abominations and punish offenders; they are not reduced to tears, which Umuofia generally considered a woman's domain. Failing to read the handwriting on the wall, even after he has spent much of his time mourning the rapid feminisation of Umuofia, Okonkwo believes that his charisma as a warrior will move his clan to fight. He has miscalculated. He stands alone in killing the head messenger sent to stop the clan's meeting. The other messengers with him are allowed to escape. Umuofia, their gods and ancestors have become complete women and will not fight. This is too much for Okonkwo the warrior to handle and he hangs himself in a small bush behind his compound.

**Conclusion**

Okonkwo's tragedy is his desire for what he detests – woman. This is sexually represented and this internal conflict destroys him. He feels pain, fear, love, and anxiety like all the 'effeminate' men he detests. But, because he has attributed these feelings to women and would not be identified with such feelings, he subdues and conquers them like he does women, leaving a shell of a man, indeed a monster.

When the novel ends with Obierika giving Okonkwo the tribute: 'That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog' (147), one wonders how true the statement is. If a terrorist, encouraged by his once-upon-a-time violence-adoring society, ends his life because this society is reconsidering some of the values on which the terrorist had been weaned, should the blame go to the outsiders or to the terrorist who has chosen not to be as flexible as his changing society?

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