



Resistance Denied: *Things Fall Apart* and Ruptures Within

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Abstract:

In Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, a violent mass upsurge against the coloniser, seemed to be the only way the novel could conclude. The possibility of resistance, however, collapsed before the collective inaction of the Umuofians who deserted their hero at the 'battlefield'. The article seeks to understand the dynamic of Igbo social behaviour in the light of specific cultural forces that ruptured the society from within. It contends that the advent of the coloniser only facilitated the growing movement from collectivism to individualism. This essay does not play down the role of colonial machinery in coercing an indigenous culture into submission. Rather it attempts to underscore the fault-lines of the indigenous culture and the complicity of natives in allowing that machinery to succeed.

The prospect of a mass uprising against the aggrandizing coloniser and the anticlimactic dénouement of its sudden flustering has intrigued the readers of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. While objective reality has the proverbial notoriety of dismissing the fantastic dreams of defiance, the denial of resistance here appears contrary to verisimilitude. The reluctance of the community to rebel and their choice of a non-confrontational status-quo is not merely caused by the punitive fear of a greater military might. The conclusion of the novel offers both an insight into the unsaid that shape the trajectory of a transitional society and factors that frustrate the consolidation of resistance.

At the conclusion of Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo, the indomitable hero goes all in to attempt a valiant last-ditch resistance against the British. Okonkwo's machete hacks down the head of the colonial messenger who appeared with the order for the natives to stop the proceedings and disband. Okonkwo's lone, spectacular daring, although consonant with the heroics of desperation; collapses before the confused Umuofians as they scuttle in panic to take cover from White man's vengeance. Okonkwo's suicide is indeed the rebellion of an unvanquished hero failed by his community, but the supreme self-erasure of the hero does not lead the text to a comprehensive finality.

For the central question remains unanswered-why was Okonkwo deserted completely and universally by the community at a moment when the hero was truly a people's man, a saviour? This



issue was raised by Patrick C. Nnoromele in his observation that Okonkwo's death leads "to the exacerbating question of why did Achebe let the hero fail especially among those who have experienced or confronted the harsh face of colonialism". But instead of developing on people's indifference to follow Okonkwo's lead, he locates the cause in the difficulty of an Igbo hero to conjoin the public obligation and private aspiration. The explanation, however, is not adequate because in spite of Okonkwo's hunger for getting recognized as a legendary hero, he embodies a social model of supreme valour which the community has mostly forgotten to follow (Nnoromele 39-49).

Explaining away the heroic fall as belonging to any variety of the tragic or seeking to identify the tragedy in the collective passivity and inanity of the community, might result in a closure that silences the nuanced subtlety of the text. Okonkwo's character should not be preemptorily dismissed with the tautological observation of inflexibility and stern rigidity as the prime causes of his downfall. Despite acknowledging Okonkwo's social making, Abiola Irele delivers the unwelcome verdict that "Things Fall Apart is the tragedy of one man, worked out of his personal conflicts-his neurosis, almost-as out of contrariness of his destiny (Whittaker 83)". Even harsher is Abdul R JanMohamed who believes Okonkwo to be an "inflexible, calcified monomaniac (Shaffer 78)." Okonkwo's personal urgency for fame, however, stems from a burning zeal to protect his community through a fierce leadership and he operates well within the normative practices of the tradition-hallowed Igbo society. He is committed to a supreme realisation of Igbo ethos and pursues that ideal with uncompromising, dogged persistence. Facing potential annihilation, the champion of a warrior clan should not be expected to fall back on strategic negotiation which was anathema to Igbo people. Begam, finding support in William Valdes Moses's argument, quotes him, "Okonkwo is, in other words, identified with his community to the extent that it esteems the martial ethos he embodies, and while his village certainly does more than make war, it especially prizes those men who win distinction on the battlefield" He concludes that, "Okonkwo's faults are essentially virtues carried to an extreme, and that while he is obviously not perfect, he nevertheless represents some of the best qualities of his culture" (Begam 400)

This article attempts to understand the collective inaction of the Igbo people who turned down their leader's call for action at a climactic moment and allowed their culture to be overrun. The historical-cultural forces that denied resistance as a possibility when it appeared the only natural outcome, must have had an inviolable logic, shaping people's behaviour. Perhaps the disintegration of the community, occasioned by the ruptures within its structure, had already compromised its cohesion. Falling apart was only inevitable before the colonising power could exploit the fault-lines and break open a fragile social structure already made vulnerable by its self-contradiction. I propose that the demise of the traditional Igbo society was owing to a movement from collectivism to individuality, from withdrawal of 'self' to assertion of 'self' in the evolving social behaviour. For the community, Okonkwo no longer represented the collective ethos of the people, and they cut him loose by asserting themselves in questioning the wisdom and validity of Okonkwo's preemptory impetuosity.



Chimera of an outrage?

The run-up to the climactic encounter between Okonkwo and the colonial system was clearly rife with explosive material. Tearing off the mask of the ancestral spirit of Egwugwu, leading to its humiliating demystification was tantamount to plundering the Igbo of its best kept secret. The over-zealous converts led by an impatient missionary crossed the line that guarded the hallowed precincts of Igbo ethnic identity. Desecration of the Egwugwu was virtually an assault on the very existence of the natives, its connection to an oracular, primordial past. The foundation of the Igbo belief system was principally a symbolic meaning making process. The ritual observances

seek to buttress the elemental ties between people and the divine with recurrence of renewal, primarily underscoring the fear of the inscrutable. Therefore, robbing the omnipotent of its enchantment and exposing the ancestral spirits to the profane, naked eyes of the mundane was the worst form of cultural invasion the natives could ever imagine. The violation was so big that the audacious act of razing the Church down found ample justification to the Igbo people. The retribution of the coloniser, however, proved to have been infinitely more overpowering. Arresting the headmen by deceit, beating them like common criminals and levying hefty fines for their release had the effect of holding in ransom the entire Igbo community. One may pause here to deliberate whose supremacy was more at risk of being jeopardised in this decisive battle. The British, for the time being, had managed to crush the adversary; but their victory ran the risk of potentially stoking the fire of a surging nationalist sentiment of the people who could now legitimately feel doubly wronged.

The emergent meeting held to decide on the measures for the shameful sacrilege and abomination; was attended by an unprecedented number of clansmen. They kept pouring in from every quarter of the nine villages and the marketplace “already had so many people that if one threw up a grain of sand it would not find its way to the earth again” Achebe. The spontaneous presence of such large number of people could only testify that the meeting had a deep emotional appeal for them. Having had a chequered history of martial prowess, the people obviously were not looking for ignominy of appeasement but an opportunity to assert their survival with counter

offensive. The survival instinct was inherently interlaced with the necessity of applying ruthless force that so much characterised the domineering, patriarchal nature of the Igbo people. An assembly, supposedly taut with the nerve-racking strain of plunging into dire action, was fittingly addressed by the prominent elders. Okika proclaimed in no uncertain terms that the decisive moment had arrived to root out the evil even at the cost of sacrificing their own brothers who would choose to take side with the evil. It was no less than a war, an epic conflict that the community embarked upon to ensure their existence.

Okonkwo’s jumping into action might have presented it as too abrupt for the people to respond, but the peremptory prohibition of the British was cause enough for a violent outburst. The fury had already been fuming in the atmosphere and Okika’s speech had the impact of kindling the fire towards inciting the crowd to a full-scale jihad. Okonkwo, as an emissary, simply began the onslaught. And yet, the clansmen remained impassive to Okonkwo’s bold deed. Instead of seizing



this as a fearless moment of dire action, they dispersed in utter consternation. The strangeness of their response not only made Okonkwo's action counter-productive but proved that the leaders had founded revolt on complicity. On a softer note, the leaders had either been impervious to the reality of the secession of the people from the glowing ideals of firmness or had lacked courage to face the unalterable truth. I would like to argue that the combination of both the reasons marked the growing divide, for Okika's passionate avowal of retribution is juxtaposed with the cautious sagacity of Obierika. Obierika was never a pacifist, he too wished his brothers to rise up at this climactic moment; but he was also the one who had seen through the futility of applying force. He told Okonkwo that the coloniser had turned some of the natives into their own and pitched them as antagonists against their own men driving out the enemy by force would not wipe out the enemy lying within. Obierika said:

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.

Okonkwo's revolt revealed the potential for defection in the rank and file of the clan. What was true about a handful of converts now appeared to be an embedded factor in the mass mentality. The number of participants and their spirited presence in the assembly did not necessarily guarantee a cohesive, unified body of people who thought the way they desired to be thought. Lacking in necessary conviction for commitment to the cause, they allowed themselves to be overcome by the fear of vengeance against the sense of security in collectivism and decried Okonkwo's action. For the voices that asked, "why did he do it?" did not simply repudiate Okonkwo's act but scoffed it as childish. For this new breed of people, loyalty to the heroic principles and martial glory had no particular appeal. They are not willing to plunge into action with the unblemished spirit of passionate rage without a scrutiny of the ideas recommended. And the seeds of this development of personality were sown long before the white men had arrived. Therefore, the prospect of mass upsurge remained unrealized for all practical purposes although the political factors were poised for a violent overthrow of foreign domination.

The Rupture Within:

The invading power best knows where the target society comes loose in its closely-knit social structure. The target culture can be diagnosed of its weakness by studying the areas picked up as vulnerable by the colonizer. The British begin the conquest through a systematic process of expelling the native religion as savage, false and deceitful. The pagan deities are summarily dismissed not merely for their presumption of power but also for their wrathful vengeance. The missionaries in Mbanta, after denigrating the local religion, add by way of illustration:

All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and He has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us."



The reference is to the oracular instructions of sacrificial killings and desertion of twin children in the depth of forests. The Omuofians as a community perhaps never doubted this supreme power of dispensing justice and aligned themselves with the will of the oracular Gods. Nevertheless, uncompromising adherence to laws was not without moral conflict and the strain must have been great for those members who were directly affected by the losses. The killing of Ikemefuna was one such incident that had made the contradictions of the society evident on many counts.

Okonkwo looked for the glory of a supreme Igbo warrior. He summoned a stoical fortitude to execute the colossal task of killing Ikemefuna who called him father. Although the act called for almost superhuman mental resolve, it invariably implied the violation of the sacred bond between a father and a child. Okonkwo's heroic firmness was ironically founded on dismantling the elemental ties of humanity. Essentially, placing the principle of revenge over regenerative life in a no-war situation, the indigenous culture appears to be structured on inherent cruelty. The sacrifice of Ikemefuna might have contributed to Okonkwo's aspiration for consolidation of his heroism but the culture nonetheless approved of the killing. At least, the oracular deities had no admonition for the perpetrator of the act.

The killing of Ikemefuna had left Okonkwo a broken man. He strived to let the episode be seen as a supreme test of putting the public before the private, but the unmistakable emotional turmoil was enough evidence that such killings never received approval from heart. At the bottom, there was an implicit disjunction in the social psyche between religious commandments and their personal acceptance. Much of it never got articulated as independent expression of variance to the public injunctions; but lay embedded in the painful process of compliance as Okonkwo did. Only rarely do we get to know how people's fear of divine retribution blocks independent action that may suggest defiance of god's ways. In Chapter 16, the locals, arguing with the visiting missionaries, articulated their fear of divine wrath if departed from their own gods:

"If we leave our gods and follow your god," asked another man, "who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?"

"Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm," replied the white man. "They are pieces of wood and stone."

When this was interpreted to the men of Mbanta they broke into derisive laughter. These men must be mad, they said to themselves. How else could they say that Ani and Amadiora were harmless? And Idemili and Ogwugwu too? And some of them began to go away.

Surprisingly, the natives are not fanatically insistent on the surpassing glory of their own gods. Instead of clinging to an impassioned attachment to their own faith by placing it above and beyond doubt, they endorse the consideration of changing camps unless there is fear of retribution. While their "derisive laughter" on White man's ignorance about the power of Igbo gods amply restores the potency of the indigenous divinity, it does not help rebutting the charge of their being vengeful.

But something more fundamental was foreshadowed by the changes wrought upon Nowye Okonkwo's eldest son. Ikemefuna's killing suddenly placed him in stark opposition to his own



culture which hid cruelty in the name of firmness. His revulsion, instead of expressing itself in angry outburst, steered him irrevocably to a vision of a more humane world- a world of love, compassion, forgiveness and music. Roselyne M. Jua observes that “things do not begin to fall apart in Umuofia only with the advent of the white man. Long before that...vital sections of the population had been silenced within the family and society: the woman and the child (Jua 201)”.

It can be argued that Nowye is an exceptional case of behavioural peculiarity, for the deeply entrenched ethnicity cannot possibly identify itself with something so utterly foreign. But Nowye’s conversion was solidly founded on ethical-moral ground and his judgement of the native culture was completely independent of foreign influence. Precisely, Nowye's emotion was proved upon his pulses; helped him gain the crucial insight on the flawed nature of the native tradition. He was like a homegrown apostle of love and humanity-one who offers a forceful alternative to the unilateral celebration of Igbo martial prowess. The conversion of Nowye had a more manifest truth than the figurative significance it implies. If it is agreed that the boy ‘defected’ not out of youthful infatuation for things glamorously new, he emerges as the representative of many who still suffer dissatisfaction with their own culture under an overriding injunction.

Much before the missionaries picked up the sensitive issue of desertion of twin children in the depth of forests, Nowye’s mind had been unhinged by the plaintive baby cry from the wilderness. The treatment of twin children and Ikemefuna’s killing, for him, were the faces of the same inherent cruelty sanctioned by the divinity. Later when the missionaries had secured a decisive victory by proving their immunity from the sinister spirits of the black forest, they found their efforts rewarded in welcoming the first woman convert-Nneka. Nneka had been a victim of the inhuman tradition of deserting the twins; she had to abandon her twins in four previous childbirths. Understandably, the mother’s heart found immense solace in the liberal dispensation of the new religion. If the deep emotional anguish of a mother is temporarily set aside, Nneka’s defection could be seen as placing personal fulfilment above community wellbeing. But Nneka is not alone, potential for defection is also found in Ekwefi when it comes to the question of protecting Ezinma from the unexplainable wrath of Agbala. Ekwefi never questioned the wish of Agbala, but she fought hard to stop the priestess taking her to the perilous, uncertain journey to the cave of the Goddess. If fear was the bedrock of devotion-the novel recurrently stresses on the fearful presence of the divine, it had not been adequate to earn spontaneous love and unsuspecting loyalty of the subjects. In essence, Ekwefi violated the divine commandment by

following Chielo, but the gravest sacrilege was certainly committed inside by doubting a benevolent, protective God. Obierika came very near to expressing it when he reflected on the sad calamity that banished Okonkwo from the village:

Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently? But although he thought for a long time he found no answer. He was merely led into greater complexities. He remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away. What crime had they committed?



The fall:

Many of the fault-lines did not actually show up until the coloniser spotted them as prizes worthy of exploitation. The chronology of their occurrence therefore, is not an ideal guide to their point of origin. There are instances of corruption and opportunism, the roots of which may be argued to predate the vicious influence of the coloniser. In Chapter twenty, Obierika apprises Okonkwo of a recent fight over land dispute which led to the hanging of Aneto by the white man's government. The punishment is however, a far cry from the ideal of delivering justice to the people, because a certain Nnama's family bribed the white man's messenger and interpreter to manipulate judgement to their favour. The corruptibility of native people finds an opportunity to flourish under the alien, indifferent and hostile government of the British. Ironically, corruption is also the prime driving force for internal colonisation. Although the court messengers came from a distant land, they speak the same language and share the same African origin. Yet they extracted fifty additional bags of cowries as fine from their own impoverished natives for the release of the Umuofian elders. The coloniser might have turned a blind eye in case they had known, but they were not responsible for instilling greed in the first place. Among the newly christened natives, the joining of Ogbuefi Ugonna is symptomatic of a radical transformation in the social dynamic. He had already been a prominent man having two titles and he "...like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away like a madman." The evident fury of rejection is symbolic of the failure of the Igbo religion in integrating the individual to the community with the wide magnanimity of concord. Ugonna's defection may be motivated by narrow individual interest unlike the nobility of Nowye's emotional appeal; but it is a definite lead to understand the seething tension in the hierarchical structure of the African tribal society. I contend that the appearance of the British in the form of a powerful adversary attracted not only the lowborn and outcasts but also lured some of the elites with the prospect of rich harvests in the changing time ahead.

Things Fall Apart, I have suggested, is ultimately about the transition of the traditional tribal society to a more individualised, self-driven society that aspires to break free from what they perceive as a rigorous regime. This journey, of course, is inspired by a delusional vision of a bright new world to be ushered in by the new agency of power that has proved its superiority in religion, trade, medicine and cunning, let alone military might. The crumbling down of the old order represented by Obierika, Okonkwo and other old-timers was only a matter of time since it had always been vulnerable in the face of a challenging, superior might. The natives simply began to change camps as the British offered those better opportunities for self-actualization. They could have remained dogmatically faithful to their own system/structure of social organisation and resisted change as many ancient civilizations had done, but the foundation of Igbo society, in spite of its rigidity, was built on a peculiar receptivity of influences and endorsement of the unknown. If it was not so, how are we supposed to understand that the Westerners were allowed to preach and build a shrine in Umuofia even when they openly denounced the native religion? The receptivity of the people is observed by Dan Izevbayea's their characteristic adaptive ability, leading to an inevitable dissociation from the hero:

The adaptive nature of Igbo history is an important factor in Achebe's conception of tragic experience. Thus although the postcolonial experience presupposes a tragic mode as one of the major



choices for African writers, in Achebe's fiction the emphasis is on the community's expectation of the continuity of life and its social detachment from the tragic hero (Izevbaye 36).

Strategic transformation of people's mind is a consensual process that convinces the agent in the necessity of change and wins his spontaneous participation. Change may not be sanctioned by imposing ideological state apparatuses onto a set of resistant people. Winning the favor of a hostile community is perhaps best exemplified by the manipulative stratagems of Mr. Brown. He had integrated religion, education, commerce and administration in his efforts to accentuate the definition of power in the new age. The natives quickly found out that the new religion and English education was a passport to the enhanced access to power in the administration. This was played out in an atmosphere of radical economic mobility as the trading store of the Europeans

pumped in much money by an unprecedented exchange of goods. What looked like a thoroughgoing victory of the coloniser's manipulative ingenuity is used by the natives to their advantage, possibly to exercise power over their own kind:

Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers- and from Umuofia labourers went forth into the vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. From the very beginning religion and education went hand in hand.

No wonder that the presence of those who still thought the new institutions evil, were unable to reclaim the others who had already gone soft with the new dispensation. My purpose here is not to downplay the ferocity of European colonial enterprise in coercing a traditional community into subjection. But the colonizer's success story was written primarily by the conscious decision of the people in buying their notion of progress and development. While this essentially meant playing into the strategies of control and occupation, the converts had had the satisfaction of seeing their own agenda fulfilled. Power and privilege of the new order entailing an edge over other members of the clan, appear to be the prime mover behind the benign complicity of the Umuofian people. The incident that brought the adversaries to a direct confrontation was occasioned by the over-zealous converts. And Enoch represented the intolerant arrogance of the newly 'empowered' villagers who either were looking to settle scores or seeking to dethrone the traditional bases of authority in sheer presumption of self-assertion. At the very least, they use the turmoil to push their influence deep into the heartland of Igbo society.

Identifying the overriding grand design of colonial machinery over a 'powerless' traditional community has the danger of seeing the subjected people as passive, incapacitated victims. This view of social dynamic practically shuts off myriad formulations of evolutionary social development by writing off the role of thinking beings operating under the play of specific social-cultural forces. The subjected people also exercise their own ideology and actively participate in having the relations of power proliferated. They seek to transfer colonisation to their own kind when overthrow of the foreign might is not an option. It is not hard to imagine that the Umuru 'ashy buttocks' would soon be joined by their Umuofian counterparts to help enslave other African people in their ambition of



gaining power under abject powerlessness.

Obierika's final outburst to the District Commissioner was a glowing tribute to Okonkwo's role as a champion. He said: "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..." But his overwhelming emotion overlooks the role of the villagers in having their hero dead. Okonkwo, truly speaking, was killed by the collective ignominy of his own neighbours who allowed him to be consumed by the fire he had lit for all.

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