



Okonkwo's Exile in Mbanta and its Significance in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Literary Analysis

Salma Haque

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh
Email: salma@iiuc.ac.bd

DOI: 10.53103/cjlls.v5i2.207

Abstract

Things Fall Apart (1958), the magnum opus of the “Father of African Literature” Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), is well-known for its representation of the African Igbo clan. Okonkwo is their leader and the richest man in his area. A multiple title holder led a peaceful, honorable life in his village Umuofia till the accidental killing of a sixteen-year-old son of the oldest, revered man Ezchedu. On the funeral of the oldest man, Okonkwo's gun misfired and killed the son of the dead man. As per the local punishment system, Okonkwo received an exile for seven years. Chapters fourteen to nineteen of the novel cover his exile. As a respectful man to local tradition, he decided to leave the village with his family of three wives and nine children. The sudden and unexpected punishment of exile baffles him, but he copes with the crisis successfully with his patience, hard work, resilience, and the support of his maternal kinsmen in the village Mbanta. We see a new Okonkwo, who lost everything due to the rage of his villagers, who burnt and destroyed his landed property, huts, and cattle. He did not lose hope of regaining everything. In the most distressed time of his life, his best friend Obierika also stood by him and revealed his genuineness as a human being, and friend to Okonkwo. This paper aims to show through textual analysis the characteristics of Okonkwo, his relation with the eldest son Nwoye, the support and the traits of his uncle and his families, Obierika's true friendship with Okonkwo through a study of his exile in Mbanata.

Keywords: Okonkwo's Exile, His Characteristics, His Supportive Relatives, Obierika's True Friendship with him, Okonkwo-Nwoye Relationship

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's great novel *Things Fall Apart* portrays one of the largest African clans the Igbo and their religion, culture, tradition, law system, matrimonial arrangement, superstitions, and the positions of women in patriarchy successfully. The reader gets to know the Igbo people, their heritage, lifestyle, food habits, and hospitality through different characters. Bernth Lindfors (1997, ix) has hailed “*Things Fall Apart* as

the most widely read and studied African novel of the last forty years”, while Kalu Ogbaa (1999, p.87) “has termed *Things Fall Apart* “the African novelists’ novel”. In the words of Shahrin Ferdous, “The first two-thirds of the novel is the synchronic presentation of Umuofian culture and society, of which Okonkwo is a product” (2017, p.37). Okonkwo, an integral part of this society, has grown up embracing its norms, values, and outlook. He not only “occupies a high position among his people but also identifies with their ancestors” (Awitor, p.55). He is the protagonist who represents masculinity, which he prefers over everything. He witnessed the shameful life of his failed father Unoka, who did not get the burial land for his tastelessness and lack of position in his clan. Okonkwo made a promise to be a title holder and an achiever in his clan. His determination and hard work earned him three titles, the title of the best wrestler by defeating “Amalinze the Cat” the unbeatable wrestler for seven years. At one stage of his life, he became the richest man of his village Umofia and earned respectable position in his clan. After becoming an achiever, he was passing peaceful life as a husband; father and clan leader. Suddenly a terrible storm blew in his life and shattered everything. From an achiever, he became a penniless person and had to leave the village for seven years for exile. In their clan, the oldest persons are revered greatly. This respect is part of their clan who believe “an old man was close to the ancestors” (Achebe, 1996, p.108). At the funeral of Ezeudu, “Drums beat violently . . . Guns were fired on all sides” (108). During this ritual, the funeral participants saw “in the centre of the crowd a boy lay in a pool of blood. It was the dead man’s sixteen –year-old son, who with his brothers and half- brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father. Okonkwo’s gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy’s heart” (p.109). At this tragic accident in this clan, “all were shocked and the clan decided to send him to an enforced exile for seven years and “The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umofia. Violent deaths are frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened . . . It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land” (p.109).

To respect the clan law and tradition, Okonkwo readied him with his belongings for the exile to this motherland Mbanata for seven years. The locals “set fire to his houses . . . killed his animals and destroyed his barn. Obierika (Okonkwo’s best friend) “sat in his *obi* and mourned his calamity. Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently” (p.110). Thus he shows his exceptionality among the clan people, who felt for his friend, but to respect the local tradition and the earth goddess he remains an witness to Okonkwo, his family’s predicament, humiliation, and loss of property, title, cattle, barns and tiles.

The heartbroken Okonkwo showed respect to the decision of the clan although the exile would be too much to bear for a man, who “was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” (Achebe, 1996, p.3). At dawn he fled to his motherland in

Mbanta, a small village near Mbaino with his wives and children who wept deeply. Obierika with six men, consoled Okonkwo, and they put the saved yams in his barn.

Before Okonkwo's exile, the reader saw him as a successful man with social standing, money, titles, but in Mbanta, a new Okonkwo arrives leaving behind everything he achieved in his fatherland. He came to his uncle's house to seek shelter unhesitatingly due to his deep bond with his kinsmen. Uchendu, the youngest uncle of Okonkwo received his mother's dead body ten years ago. Okonkwo accompanied his dead mother to her parental house. After ten years, the uncle receives him and his large family warmly. During Okonkwo's exile in his uncle's house, we can see his good sides as a human being, uncle and host. After seeing the sad face of Okonkwo, he does not question the nephew, till he shares his sorrow with his uncle. Thus he shows his sensibility and experience to Okonkwo. The caring man also offers "requisite rights and sacrifices" (p.113) for the nephew and his family. He also gives Okonkwo ground to build huts and pieces of land for cultivation. Okonkwo does not forget his personal god by installing one in his hut. We see his religiosity is intact even in his dire strait. The cousins are also caring to him by providing him seed-yams for plantation. They know Okonkwo needs to start his life anew. Uchendu teaches Okonkwo wisdom to overcome his adversity. He is not a regular comer here, but time could not abate their feelings for each other. The loving atmosphere in the new address made Okonkwo and his family "happy, refreshed and thankful" (p.114).

With renewed spirit, the hardworking, struggling Okonkwo starts to plant his new farm. He has to work hard when he is supposed to live peacefully in the midst of his property. After achieving the desired things in life, he lost everything. In unexpected or expected crisis, most people fail miserably due to lack of coping capacities. The courageous Okonkwo did not give up hope for a bright future and tries his best to adjust with the new painful life because of his effort, and the supportive, comforting kinsmen in a new place. During his exile, Uchendu's son Amikwu marries and his sisters and cousins come from their husbands' houses. We also come to know that daughters come to their parental homes if anybody dies in the family. The cultures of not forgetting daughters, who remain away from their paternal families, are never forgotten. So, Okonkwo's exile also gives the readers ideas about the matrimonial traditions and the roles of women in the parental houses. Uchendu is also respectful to the young men and gives them the opportunity to voice their opinions to him as he values the opinions of the youth. He also teaches Okonkwo and the family members about a bitter truth. "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" (p.118). These utterances reveal his wisdom. If we look at the British history, we see, after the execution of Charles I in 1649, his wife and children fled to their motherland France where they got safe shelter for eleven long years till the beginning of the restoration in 1660. Uchendu reminds Okonkwo about the

responsibility of respecting dead mother as a son and says to him, "Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years" (p.118). He comforts his nephew by giving examples from his life that after losing twenty-two children he "did not hang myself" (p.118). The wise, caring, experienced man repeatedly gives him life-lessons to rebuild his confidence and hope in a new home. Before Okonkwo's return to his village, he gives a speech where "he prayed for the ancestors" (p.46). He asked them for health and the children wished for Okonkwo and his family. His speech is full of his wisdom and a learning experience for Okonkwo and the reader, "We do not ask for wealth because he that has health and children will have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen" (p.146).

In the second year of the exile, Okonkwo's friend Obierika visits him with two men who carried bags full of cowries which he obtained by selling yams after Okonkwo's departure from the village. He knew the requirement of money in Okonkwo's life in his exile. Distance could not kill their true friendship, and Obierika is received with warmth by all the members of Uchendu and Okonkwo's family. They showed their hospitality instead of getting irritated by the arrival of three guests to their house. The thrilled, happy Okonkwo introduces Obierika to all "This is Obierika, my great friend" and shows his gratefulness to him" (p.119). This way Okonkwo recognizes the greatness of his friend is amazing. This way he shows his gratefulness and uniqueness as a human being. Obierika not only brings money but also news for his friend who cannot be updated about the life in Umofia, his fatherland, which he had to leave behind. Obierika informs him about the new arrivals to the market in Abame and "everybody was killed except the old and the sick . . ." (p.122). After hearing the news, Okonkwo shows his concern "They were fools . . . They should have been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns. . . ." (p.122). During his exile, Okonkwo is supposed to be untouched by the sorrows of his clan, but he gets affected by their troubles and imminent danger as he is deeply rooted to his clan.

Obierika revisited Okonkwo two years after his exile to inform his friend about the arrival of the missionaries in Umofia, "who had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages" (p.120). Obierika saw Nwoye, Okonkwo's eldest son, with the missionaries and he considered it his duty to warn his friend about Nwoye's shocking association with the new religious leaders. He is greatly worried about the boy, who refused to be known as Okonkwo's son, "He is not my father" (p.120). In the meanwhile, the missionaries started preaching the Gospel with the help of the interpreters as they did not know the Igbo dialects. Among the new converts, Okonkwo's son Nwoye was one of them, who had been captivated by Christianity. As Nwoye is terrified of his abusive father, he does not share any healthy relationship with him, "He dared not to go near the missionaries for

fear of his father” (p.131). He is strikingly opposite to his father but has similarities with his failed grandfather Unoka, who was gentle, music lover and a timid. Okonkwo dislikes these features of his son, who is a coward and is considered an effeminate. Okonkwo is hopeless about his son’s future as he lacks masculinity. One late afternoon when he came back to his *obi*, “his father suddenly overcome with fury, sprang to his feet and gripped him by the neck” (p.133) forgetting about the consequences of his violent activities. During this time, Uchendu came forward to rescue the grandson and saved him from Okonkwo’s rage, who lost his senses. He is over confident of his own masculinity and desires to see the son as a super confident man. Noye is an important character in the exiled life of Okonkwo, who “was happy to leave his father. He would return later to his mother and his brothers and sisters and convert them to the new faith” (p.134). Okonkwo is frightened of the conversion of the other sons into a new faith after his death. He did not give his son any chance to have a healthy discussion about the reason of his conversion to Christianity. Nwoye who had a lot of issues about his religion polytheism and his culture, which has some negative practices. He saw the evil culture of throwing away the twins into the evil forest. The men without titles do not get burial grounds. The groundless killing of his foster brother Ikemefuna (with whom he developed a great bond) at the hands of his father to preserve local culture causes deep hatred about his religion. He used to be beaten up by his father for being timid, but Ikemefuna taught him how to be masculine without being rude. He wanted change and wanted to rid him of his father’s abuse as his home was never a peaceful place for the bitter presence of his father. He had a lot to say with his father about the changed mind, about his disrespect for the unjust murder of his foster brother. Unfortunately he never dared to talk about his grudges against his father’s dislikable activities. Okonkwo never tried to understand him and drove him away from his life forever. In the exiled life, Nwoye plays a great role to make us understand the problems between the father and the son. We also realize the need for having healthy relationship between sons and fathers in any culture, race. As the father intends to give importance to masculinity and timidity, he detests his son, especially when femininity, fear is seen in his first son. He wanted Nwoye to be able to control women folk in future. For lack of boldness of Nwoye, he used to beat and rebuke his son cruelly. This way, he built an unbridgeable gap with his son and made him distance from his father forever, which helps the reader to know Okonkwo as a failed father repeatedly.

During Okonkwo’s stay in Mbanta, where the missionaries established a church to persuade the locals, an assembly was gathered about the merciless killing of a python by a local which is an abominable act in their religion. In the assembly, Okonkwo says “We should do something. But let us ostracize these men. We would then not be accountable for the abominations” (p.140). His love for his religion makes the other persons agree to ostracize the Christians. We see his leadership quality and the love for

his religion even in his exile.

Okonkwo shows his prudence before the return to his native village. In the “last year in exile Okonkwo sent money to Obierika to build him two huts in his old compound where he and his family would live until he built more huts and the outside wall of his compound” (p.143). He can only assign the duty to Obierika who is dependable, responsible and trustworthy. Before his departure from his motherland he orders his wives to arrange a great feast with ‘three goats and a number of fowls,” “I must thank my mother’s kinsmen before I go” (p.144) as he wants to return the hospitality, shelter, love and support of his kinsmen.

Things Fall Apart has three parts and the exile takes place in the second part, which starts with his unexpected, shameful exile to his uncle’s house with much insecurity, inconfidence and ends with his generous feasts. The exile event is a significant part of the novel. If the exile had not occurred, the reader might not have been introduced with maternal kinsmen of Okonkwo, their praiseworthy characteristics, support for comforting the distressed men who came to them losing everything. Okonkwo’s exile could have been painful, troublesome for him without the supportive, emphatic kinsmen of his mother’s sides. If he had been into exile to an unknown place, it could have destroyed him completely. He was distant from his village, but always felt sense of connection, belonging to his clan. He was deeply worried about the arrival of the white Europeans to the country. Generally, people get exile for political, social or religious reasons. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo got the exile as compensation for the accidental killing of a young boy by the clan. He submitted him to fate and left the village secretly as his people created havoc in his homes. Though he was punished for an inadvertent mistakes, he did not forget his people. He shows his good sides which were hidden in him in Umofia. His life before the exile was full of achievements. He was a terror to his wives and children, and he used to maintain distance from all. During his exile, he becomes close to his uncle and cousins and shows his resilience to his shameful dislocation with a lot of family members. He shows his gratefulness by arranging a feast for his relatives, who welcomed him warmly during his agonizing time. At the same time, we see him as a failed father, who for his stubbornness, lack of understanding, and rigidity loses his eldest son Nwoye forever. Okonkwo’s exile also shows the uniqueness of Obierika as a friend and the greatness of his sheltering uncle and his family members. The exile also teaches Okonkwo and the reader about practical life lessons to be ready to accept adversities in life, which can strike people at any time no matter what his/her position is. It also teaches us that if one has faith in God, confidence, patience, determination, ability to work hard, the hardest time will be short-lived. The support of the family also matters, and Okonkwo was lucky enough to get it, and the qualities to overcome the unexpected tragedy of his life during his exile to Mbanta.

References

- Achebe, C. (1998). *Things Fall Apart*. South Africa: William Heinemann Ltd.,
- Atwoir, E. (2013). *Individuality in Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958): The Case of Okonkwo*. *Views*, 37, pp.52-62. fahal-02340771f. Available at Revue angliciste de La Réunion. *Side Views*, 37, 52-62. fahal-02340771f
- Ferdous, S. (2017). Dissent in *Things Fall Apart: A Case of Okonkwo*. *Crossings: A Journal of English Studies*, 8.
- Lindfors, B. (1997). Introduction. In: Lindfors, Bernth (ed.) *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*. Jackson: University of Mississippi. MacDonald,
- Ogbba, K. (1999). *Understanding Things Fall Apart: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents*. Greenwood: Westport (PDF) Okonkwo's fate and the worldview of *Things Fall Apart*.