

THE HERO ARCHETYPE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract: The hero archetype is one of the most recurrent character archetypes in the world literature. There is a universal pattern regarding hero myths even though they were developed by groups or individuals who did not have even the slightest direct cultural contact with each other. Although there are centuries between Hercules and Batman or Artemis and Katniss Everdeen, it is remarkable that heroes and heroines have a lot of characteristics in common. Some of these characteristics might include superhuman strength, determination, exceptional bravery, rapid rise to power and hard-won triumphs. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, does not have a lucky start in life as son of Unoka who has spent his whole life in poverty and never participated in tribal wars. However, Okonkwo is so strong-willed that he not only becomes a prosperous man and but also displays incredible prowess in tribal wars. Thanks to his achievements, he becomes known as one of the greatest men of his time. Therefore, this study aims at highlighting the fact that Okonkwo displays some of the most common characteristics of the hero archetype.

Keywords: Archetypes, myths, heroes, heroines, hero archetype

1. INTRODUCTION

Carl Gustav Jung argues that our “collective unconscious” is a primordial treasure of dreams and myths we have inherited from the time of our forefathers, and it contains the universal themes and images (Jung, 2014: 8). Jung states he has chosen the term collective because he believes this part of the unconscious is universal rather than personal as he affirms “in contrast to the personal psyche, the collective unconscious has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals” (Jung, 2014: 3-4). As individuals, we sometimes find ourselves having to decide between two different ways of behaviour or action. Without much consideration of what is happening at the time, we are most likely to feel obliged to choose the good one or the one which has moral value. We instinctively follow the path which will make us feel more dignified even though we have not specifically been taught to do so. The reason for this, according to Jung, is the fact that “the unconscious knows more than the consciousness does” (Jung, 2013: 374) because “it is a knowledge of a special sort, knowledge in eternity, usually without reference to the here and now, not couched in language of the intellect” (Jung, 2013: 374). In his *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*, Jung argues that “the natural and indispensable intermediate stage between unconscious and conscious cognition is the myth” (Jung, 2013: 374). Myth is a Greek word meaning story, especially a story about “gods or heroes” (Frye & Macpherson, 2004: 275). In today’s world, myths are known as traditional stories mostly about supernatural beings, gods, or heroes and they are influential in numerous literary works. We do not know exactly how and when these stories began to be told, but they first came into literature “in the works of the early Greek poets Homer and Hesiod” (Frye & Macpherson, 2004: 275). Myths contain common experiences of universal man, whether pleasant or unpleasant and thus, they encapsulate possible

outcomes of a person’s actions. They force every one of us to act in a certain way although we are not aware of their existence in our collective unconscious. To put it differently, without or prior to personal experiences, myths construct a bridge between the mind of an individual and the universality. Therefore, myths play an important role in the individual’s psyche. According to Campbell, they are “clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life” (Campbell, 1988: 5). Jung regards myths as “depersonalized” dreams and he puts forward that they are mirrored through “archetypes” (Jung, 2014: 267).

The word archetype derives from a Greek compound of “arche” and “tupos” (Henderson, 2017: viii). “Arche” or “first principle” means the creative source, which “cannot be represented or seen directly” (Henderson, 2017: viii). “Tupos” or “impression”, as Joseph Henderson states, relates to “any one of the numerous manifestations of the first principle” (Henderson, 2017: viii). Archetypes can be interpreted as repeated patterns of the common human experience, and hence they have a central role in dreams, myths, legends, and various works of literature. Originating from our collective unconscious, they represent joys, desires, the deepest dreams, and fears of the universal man rather than a single individual. Archetypes can be applied to symbols, images, and situations. For instance, light usually means knowledge or hope whereas darkness stands for ignorance and despair. Similarly, springtime represents the reawakening of nature and birth whereas winter indicates hibernation and death. There are also numerous recurrent character archetypes. Some of these are the hero, the great mother, the magician, the explorer and the innocent. The hero is the most common archetype as the hero myth has continuously been appearing in legends of almost all nations. The heroic myth exists “in the classical mythology of Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages, in the Far East, and among contemporary primitive tribes” (Henderson, 2013: 101), and

the function of the heroic myth, as Joseph Henderson remarks, is “the development of the individual's ego-consciousness — his awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses—in a manner that will equip him for the arduous tasks with which life confronts him” (Henderson, 2013: 101). Henderson suggests hero myths “vary enormously in detail”, and he adds that when closely examined “structurally they are very similar” (Henderson, 2013: 107). He states that there is “a universal pattern” regarding hero myths even though they were developed by groups or individuals who did not have any direct cultural contact with each other. Archetypal heroes display important psychological aspects of human life such as strength, achievement, and glory. The hero archetype has much of the same life pattern such as encountering unexpected obstacles yet finally managing to overcome them with his determination and wisdom. A hero has superhuman strength and displays acts of exceptional bravery. He has certain goals to achieve and even if these goals seem unattainable, he somehow finds a way to obtain them. In other words, no matter how challenging the circumstances are, a hero accomplishes arduous tasks with his determination and proves his “hero-hood” that is believed by Campbell to be “predestined, rather than simply achieved” (Campbell, 2008: 319). In addition to his determination to overcome whatever obstacle may come his way; a hero is also fearless in character. He is extraordinarily brave and always in readiness to take action even when he puts himself in danger at the cost of living, which distinguishes a hero from ordinary people. He usually leaves his home or land and lives with others to be equipped with knowledge and strength. He strives to prove himself many times while on the adventure. Furthermore, a hero goes out of his way or even sacrifices his life for the sake of his ideals. On the other hand, a hero is not always a flawless individual or embodiment of perfection, he might also have a weakness as well as a sharp distinctive strength as Feist and Feist affirm, “[A]n immortal person with no weakness cannot be a hero” (Feist & Feist, 2006: 111). Apart from that, for a hero, this weakness appears to be either the first obstacle to overcome or an inevitable cause of a tragic fall. Henderson lists some of the most common characteristics of the hero myth as “hero’s miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (hybris), and his fall through betrayal or a “heroic” sacrifice that ends in his death” (Henderson, 2013: 10).

2. THINGS FALL APART AND TRADITIONAL IGBO COMMUNITY

Community in Things Fall Apart is composed of different groups with various social and political positions. It believes in Chukwu, the supreme god, and minor gods such as Ani, the goddess of earth. The oracles and the chief priests, who are responsible for interpreting religious doctrines, are members of the ruling class, so they have enormous power. Igbo community mainly depends on agriculture and survival is the biggest concern of the Igbo. As a result, it inherits two main challenges. One is the physical environment, which is necessary for growing yams and a good harvest, and the other is tribal wars that might result in their defeat. In accordance with the challenges of Igbo, clan members highly appreciate material wealth, masculinity, and especially

bravery. Accordingly, one’s social class is mainly determined by the combination of these qualities. Therefore, the number of one’s barns or yams, even wives, and bravery in battle, skill at wrestling have a vital influence on the lives of Igbo people. Since all these things come together and determine one's social rank, they are extremely important for those who have the desire to belong to the privileged class. In Igbo, there is also a title society that is a special class and consists of only male members of the community. Those who are the wealthiest and most masculine are the ones who are more likely to attain titles, and titles are signified by ankle bracelets. The number of one's ankle bracelets signifies the number of titles he has obtained, and the more titles one has, the more respected and advantageous he will be amongst other members of the clan. On the other hand, the Igbo community does not show sympathy to those who are effeminate and cannot provide for their families. Moreover, titles are simply unobtainable for them. Like most people in his clan, Okonkwo does not show much tolerance and sympathy towards such people and he has no patience with unsuccessful men.

One’s social class is not merely determined by economic factors. Yet, at the same time, economic factors play a major role in defining it, so Igbo men are firstly expected to grow yams to provide for their families. Therefore, a person who does not come from a wealthy family like Okonkwo, having a barn or growing yams is a good start to prove his industry and physical strength. Apart from material wealth, Igbo people value masculinity and bravery above all. Therefore, Igbo men are expected to prove not only their labour but also physical strength and fearlessness through wrestling and tribal wars. If a man wants to be one of the leaders of the Igbo community, he also needs to gain others’ respect and a good reputation in the clan, which is possible by attaining multiple titles. However, a title is not easily attained in Igbo culture, but when it is obtained; it is a sign of honour from the other clan members. For example, Okoye, a clan member, “had a large barn full of yams and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land” (Achebe, 1959: 6). There was another wealthy member of Igbo whose name was Nwakibie. He had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. “He had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan” (Achebe, 1959: 18).

Igbo values bravery in wars and thus Igbo men are raised and taught to become great and fearless warriors. Umuofia is feared by all its neighbours because it is powerful in war. It is so well-known with its greatness in war that its neighbouring clans would not go to war against it without first trying “a peaceful settlement” (Achebe, 1959: 12). As a matter of course, maintaining their clan’s reputation amongst all clans is vitally important for the Igbo community. In addition, being a fearless warrior and proving it in wars are important requirements of gaining the respect of other clan members. In accordance with this, titles are mostly given to those members who have proven their courage in tribal wars. In other words, bravery is a determinant factor in distinguishing between a man who has deserved titles and who has not. For instance, Okonkwo’s father, Unoka, could not bear the sight of blood. He has not participated in any tribal wars, hence has never attained a title.

Apart from that, funerals for the respected members of the community are organized elaborately in Igbo. To show their respect to the dead members of the clan for the last time, clan members organize a traditional ceremony in which people play the drums and dance before the burial of the prestigious member. One of the most respected members of Igbo was Ezeudu and he was the oldest man in Umuofia, he “was now accorded great respect in all the clan” (Achebe, 1959: 121) since he was a great and fearless warrior. Therefore, Ezeudu’s funeral was worthy of his greatness, and “from morning till night warriors came and went in their age groups” (Achebe, 1959: 121). Nevertheless, things were completely different when Okonkwo’s father died because Unoka had been a debtor throughout his life. Unoka was an exceptional member of the Igbo community. Unlike the rest of the Igbo men who strove to prove their masculinity through the exciting wrestling matches and bravery in war, “Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood (Achebe, 1959: 6). Leave aside meeting the expectations of his community, Unoka could hardly meet the needs of his family, and each time he ended up borrowing more money that he would never be able to repay. Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in convincing people, borrowing more money, and “piling up his debts (Achebe, 1959: 5). Unoka did not have a funeral like Ezeudu, indeed he did not even have a funeral. The reflection of the distinctive difference between Ezeudu’s and Unoka’s lives can also be observed through the dissimilarity of society’s reaction to Ezeudu and Unoka’s death. Unoka “died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess” (Achebe, 1959: 18), so he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and “left there to die” (Achebe, 1959: 18). Okonkwo was “possessed by the fear of his father’s contemptible life and shameful death” (Achebe, 1959: 18).

2.1. Okonkwo as an Archetypal Hero

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo was a strong and respected man “who was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” (Achebe, 1959: 1). In accordance with the values and priorities of Igbo society, Okonkwo valued masculinity and bravery above all and represented only his strong and confident face to the world around him. Achebe mentions Okonkwo’s “early proof of superhuman strength” (Henderson, 2013: 10) by stating that Okonkwo brought honour to his village by “throwing Amalinze the Cat” (Achebe, 1959: 1) who has never been beaten for seven years only when he was eighteen. He soon became “the first to bring home a human head” in Umuofia’s latest war (Achebe, 1959: 10). Okonkwo knew that he needed material wealth to elevate himself in Igbo society since Igbo regarded a man who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another as a very great man. However, since his father Unoka was more concerned with music than farming throughout his life, Okonkwo “neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife” (Achebe, 1959: 18). Therefore, Okonkwo started to grow yams as a sharecropper because, for a young man whose father had no yams, there was no other way. Nevertheless, despite all his hard work, Okonkwo was not lucky when the harvest season came. It was “like a funeral” (Achebe, 1959: 24), but Okonkwo was so strong-willed that instead of giving up he said: “[S]ince I survived that year, I

shall survive anything” (Achebe, 1959: 24). Okonkwo not only survived that year but also became a prosperous farmer shortly thereafter. Okonkwo’s sudden rise “from great poverty and misfortune” to be “one of the lords of the clan” (Achebe, 1959: 24) indicates the “rapid rise to prominence or power” (Henderson, 2013: 10) which is one of the most common characteristics of the hero archetype. Campbell defines a hero as “a man or a woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations” (Campbell, 2008: 19-20). Despite all the limitations resulting from his father’s lazy and effeminate fame in the clan, Okonkwo “had begun even in his father’s lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future” (Achebe, 1959: 18). Okonkwo proved his determination to achieve by not only growing yams but also in wrestling matches. He made tremendous efforts to succeed because in Igbo “a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father” (Achebe, 1959: 8). Keeping this in mind, Okonkwo knew that so long as he tried hard enough, he could gain the respect of his clan and make them forget about his father’s failure and weakness. Therefore, whatever his father could not achieve even when he was young and healthy became Okonkwo’s goal to obtain.

He was still young but he had won fame as the greatest wrestler in the nine villages. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time (Achebe, 1959: 8).

Okonkwo’s achievements reached such an extent that he became one of the most respected members of his clan. He became “the greatest wrestler and warrior” (Achebe, 1959: 118) of his time and became “one of the lords of the clan” (Achebe, 1959: 24). This was why and how Ikemefuna was given to Okonkwo when he was taken from his village, Mbaino, as compensation for a young woman of Igbo who was killed in Ikemefuna’s village when she went to market. Ikemefuna “was sacrificed to the village of Umuofia by their neighbours to avoid war and bloodshed” (Achebe, 1959: 8). As Ikemefuna’s father killed Ogbuefi Udo’s young wife, it was decided by the elders of Umuofia that a virgin would be given to Ogbuefi, and Ikemefuna, “the doomed lad” (Achebe, 1959: 8) would live with Okonkwo and his family. No one thought it would take three years. In these years, Ikemefuna became wholly absorbed into his new family and he “could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father” (Achebe, 1959: 52).

Feist and Feist affirm “[A]n immortal person with no weakness cannot be a hero” (Feist & Feist, 2006: 111). Okonkwo’s weakness was his fear of being like his father Unoka, “lazy and improvident” (Achebe, 1959: 4). Unoka had never been attracted to the clan’s masculine values. He was neither a great farmer nor a brave warrior and was called *agbala* which “was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title” (Achebe, 1959: 13). Unoka had never participated in tribal wars, gained a title or the respect of other clan members in his lifetime. His father’s failure and weakness in the clan became so insuperable for Okonkwo that despite all his achievements and his sudden rise from poverty to wealth,

Okonkwo's fear did not come to a complete end. "His whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father" (Achebe, 1959: 13). It was the same fear that resulted in his killing of Ikemefuna as he shed Ikemefuna's blood with his machete. Although Ikemefuna called him father, Okonkwo killed the ill-fated lad in a few seconds. "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe, 1959: 61).

In addition to that, Okonkwo accidentally killed Ezedu's 16-year-old son when his gun accidentally exploded at Ezedu's funeral. The elders of the clan decided that Okonkwo's crime required exoneration, so Okonkwo was condemned to live in exile in his motherland for seven years. During these years, Okonkwo was looking forward to returning to his clan, but his "return to his native land was not as memorable as he had wished" (Achebe, 1959: 182). The Umuofians did not seem to "have taken any special notice of the warrior's return" (Achebe, 1959: 182). As a result of the penetration with the British colonial forces, Umuofia had changed during the seven years Okonkwo was in exile in his mother's village. The white missionaries had built a courthouse and a church. The first people to convert to Christianity in Umuofia were the ones that have been isolated and alienated from society. The major transformations in Umuofia drove Okonkwo to despair over his clan's unity that had been maintained conscientiously for so long. Okonkwo felt deeply grieved for his clan that was "breaking up and falling apart" (Achebe, 1959: 183). Okonkwo mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, and he wished Umuofia would decide on war against the white men as in the old days. When Okonkwo learnt that his son Nwoye attended the missionary church, "[A] sudden fury rose within him and he felt a strong desire to take up his machete, go to the church and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang", but then he reminded himself that "Nwoye was not worth fighting for" (Achebe, 1959: 152). With the burden of this pain, Okonkwo "cried in his heart," and he thought he was cursed with such a son.

When all men of Umuofia finally gathered to hold a meeting in the marketplace to talk about the colonial missionaries and the things that had been happening since the first day of the white men's arrival, Okonkwo was already looking for an opportunity to plan his "own revenge" (Achebe, 1959: 200). "...Umuofia was at last going to speak its mind about the things that were happening" (Achebe, 1959: 199). However, soon after the meeting started, it was interrupted by five court messengers. The head messenger, confronting Okonkwo, fearlessly said: "[T]he white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop" (Achebe, 1959: 204). Okonkwo became full of anger and hatred. "[I]n a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body" (Achebe, 1959: 204). As "a man of action" (Achebe, 1959: 10), Okonkwo realized that his clan could "no longer act like one" (Achebe, 1959: 176), and he felt deeply disappointed and betrayed by his clan and the fact that his clansmen became "soft like women" (Achebe, 1959: 183). Moreover, he felt disheartened by the fact that they have lost their spirit to maintain the clan's unity. He thought his clansmen would never be able to resist against the colonial missionaries as they had already let the other messengers

escape instead of killing them. Only then did Okonkwo make sure that his community could no longer act like one to resist against the colonial missionaries. He found out that he was completely alone in his opposition to the new authority. When his clan members found him, Okonkwo's dead body was dangling on a tree. Simply giving in or waiting for being punished by the colonial forces would have been far from Okonkwo's heroic soul. He found the solution in taking his life since he was in depths of despair to see how things had fallen apart in his community following the arrival of the white missionaries. In addition, as Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers affirm, "the hero sacrifices himself" (Campbell & Moyers, 1988: 127) for something bigger than himself, Okonkwo's suicide indicates a heroic sacrifice to awaken his clansmen who were not aware of the danger of the changes brought by the colonial missionaries. The hero's suicide can be interpreted as his last attempt to show his clansmen that distancing from traditional values will result in the death of Igbo culture and break the unity and harmony that have been conscientiously preserved by the community members so far.

3. CONCLUSION

Okonkwo was not lucky to start life as Unoka's son since his father's laziness and cowardice were known by everybody in the clan. Unlike his father, Okonkwo was a brave physically strong man whose achievements in wrestling matches at a young age brought honour to his clan. Male members of Igbo society were expected to provide for their families and to prove their strength and masculinity in wrestling matches and tribal wars. As Unoka's son and production of traditional Igbo society, Okonkwo knew that he had to make an extraordinary effort to cleanse off his father's effeminate fame. He encountered a lot of challenges in farming such as lack of yam seeds and unfavourable harvest season. However, he was so determined to succeed that he soon became a prosperous farmer. In addition to meeting his family's needs and becoming a wealthy farmer, Okonkwo displayed exceptional bravery in tribal wars. Whenever the elders of his clan decided waging war on another clan was the only option for the wholeness and welfare of Umuofia, Okonkwo was always in readiness to fight and die for his community without hesitation. Thanks to his praiseworthy effort and solid achievements, he attained fame and multiple titles. Despite his father's failure and effeminate fame in Igbo, Okonkwo rose from misfortune to be one of the greatest men of his time. Nevertheless, after the arrival of the British colonial missionaries, Okonkwo found out that his clansmen would not take up arms against the colonial forces as they would in the old days. Thus, his thwarted expectations and disintegration to the new order reached an unbearable level and he committed suicide because easily giving in his hard-won fame and reputation to the colonial missionaries would be far from Okonkwo's heroic soul. By taking his own life, not only did he save his heroic fame and dignity but also made a heroic sacrifice for the rest of his community to underline the permanent loss of traditional Igbo values and its hazardous effects on his clan.

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