

**Character of Unoka and Okonkwo in Things Fall Apart by Chinua**

**Achebe: A Comparative Study**

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**Abstract**

*This paper shall discuss the character of Unoka the father and Okonkwo the son. It is understood that both have certain qualities to be admired. One being good at work and the other being good at music. Okonkwo believed in his valor. But his father was a man who enjoyed his life by being selfish who did not take care of his family. Okonkwo hated everything his father loved .It is also understood that both end up their life very pathetically by going into different spheres of life. The novelist Chinua Achebe has carefully portrayed these two characters to evoke the sympathy of the readers. The comparison between the father and son proves to be applied to anybody's life.*

*Key words: Colonialism, Valour, relationship, Pathetic, comparison, Culture, Tradition*

**Introduction**

Modern African literature represents one of the medium through which African writers discuss issues within their socio-cultural environment. Achebe was raised by his parents in the Igbo town of Ogidi in south-eastern Nigeria. Although his parents were

Protestant and practiced the Christian faith, Achebe and his siblings were also exposed to traditional Igbo culture, which included a heavy emphasis on storytelling. Achebe excelled in school and began writing stories as a university student. He published and gained worldwide attention for *Things Fall Apart* in 1958.

Chinua Achebe's writing is not one-sided: he shows good and bad sides of both parts involved in conflict as well. On one hand he describes how the coming of British colonizers tore apart the pure Igbo society and its rules and values and completely changed it, which destroyed the old way of Igbo people's life for good. Book *Things Fall Apart* is much more famous and influential in the world. *Things Fall Apart* describes Igbo traditions in a detail and it is important to include here the in-depth description of the story because it describes the original pure Igbo society, the first meeting of British missionaries with Igbos and the impact it had on the Igbo village. Through the characteristic of Okonkwo, the author shows the typical Igbo tradition and thinking of Igbo people and he also uses Okonkwo's point of view to show the slow changes of his village and Igbo society in general after the coming of the missionaries.

Most of Achebe's novels would have a father-son relationship as a theme. Unoka, in *Things Fall Apart* is quite contrast to his son Okonkwo. The father is unworthy of a great, industrious, persevering son bent upon making himself a successful man. Only their physical imperfections are similar and put them into a single boat. But there was a wide mental gap between the two which nothing could bridge and unite them. They can never be compared in terms of their character and attitude. The contrast between Okonkwo and his father Unoka is strikingly staggering. If Okonkwo was industrious (a farmer he was), hard-working, labouring tirelessly towards prosperity. He fashioned himself as the most successful man in the Igbo society. On the contrary, his father Unoka, though he delighted the hearts of many an Igbo with his songs, he easily earned their contempt and ridicule and derision for his shallowness, incompetence, indolence, debt-ridden life, deceptive promise of "I shall pay, but not today". Unoka, finally, died an inglorious, abominable death (died of a disease) and was buried in the evil forest. Okonkwo naturally, hated his father whose 'failure' in life had bred a sort of indescribable 'aversion-phobia' in him. But one may wonder whether Okonkwo took effective strong steps to rehabilitate this music-loving, drunk father. He hugely, ignominiously failed in his sacred, filial duty. One may argue that Okonkwo's lofty ideals and

creditable achievements fail to inspire the quintessential element of humanity and love in the son Okonkwo to take a kindly view of his father and to make an attempt to reform his father, of course, a bundle of boundless deficiencies.

Achebe develops the character of his protagonist, Okonkwo in terms of heroic meritorious, laudable deeds which enhanced his reputation. He was the proud face of the society. He drank from a human head (which itself was a mark of his social status as well as his militaristic and martial spirit and proven heroic feats in tribal wars). If his great success in life turned Okonkwo into an icon of his society, it also turned his head. Once contemptuously referred to a man (who dared to disagree with him in a meeting) as a 'woman implying he was a titleless, cowardly person. Ironically, it was how his father was derisively taunted and laughed at. Such ironical situations abound in Achebe's fiction. Perhaps, it was impudent on his part to forget all about his father's character and nature to insult another person. One can say that it is an expression of Okonkwo's inner most desire to repudiate or relieve himself of, all the bad memories of his cowardly father from the public mind, who is constantly pecked at by the people for his pusillanimity. Okonkwo, one may say, is a striking foil to his indolent, craven-hearted father. It is relevant to remember that the theme of father-son relationship has its own significance in Achebe's fiction.

Achebe's depiction of Unoka gives rise to contrary views and there is a welter of interpretations. Unoka was ever an irresponsible father and head of the family, a shameless loafer, an ingenious, 'industrious debtor. But to others, he was an accomplished artist, a popular musician. Ode Ogede is not happy with Okonkwo for the ill-treatment of his father (100). Okonkwo "is the kind of a person who is as happy as a lark" (56). He did not take life seriously. He was a good natured person though he was frivolous. Ode Ogede explains why Okonkwo hated him so much is the facts that he attaches much importance to his own personal ideals as well as the ideals of his society which Okonkwo values. Okonkwo is snobbish and overweening. Further, Okonkwo is "a hypertensive, hypersensitive megalomaniac" (Ode Ogede 57). Okonkwo goes all out to achieve remarkable success whatever he does.

They are quite opposite to each other with regard to their honesty, strong moral principles, confirmed integrity, sense of dignity and honour, social status, respect for work

and labour and unsubduable courage and recklessness. As a matter of fact both son and father fail in the end but in different ways and for different reasons. When Unoka was young, he was lazy and deprived of earthly riches. He never cared to provide for the welfare of his family. His irresponsible attitude was not liked by his son. His character and his conduct were never improved. Achebe sarcastically remarks his character with a touch of little humour, “If any money came his way and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm – wine and made merry” (TFA 4). He was persevering, adroit, skilful and never ashamed to borrow money and repaying of the borrowed money was never his habit and he deliberately avoided it. Even after becoming a man of responsibility he did not try to show any signs of change and betterment.

His addiction to drinking palm-wine and singing, feasting and dancing was known to the entire Igbo Clan. He was a man of music which was in great demand by the music lovers. Ode Ogidi strikes a different opinion on Unoka for his musical talent : “Unoka is not the worthless man that his son makes him out to be. He is an accomplished artist whose expertise is much sought after by other villages” ( 99-100). But his ravenous and starved family was not benefitted by his liveliness and expertise and his livelihood agonies continued to be the same.

Unoka always looked forward to his present pleasure. He happily withdrew his mind from all distressing and wearisome thoughts and apprehensions about his future, which he thought, were perturbing from his present. In short, he was an exhilarating and amazing unifying thread of the Dionysian and Epicurean qualities. “Unoka loved the good fare and the good fellowship...” (TFA 4).Unoka also received censure and damning criticism for his casual and unrestrained disconnect with the responsibilities and duties of real life.

The ability of convince others to part with their money is an another noticeable feature of this futureless Igbo man. And Achebe seems to be enjoying his rollicking scene of how Unoka deceives Okoye with a customary promise, “I shall pay but not today” (TFA 7).He made promises to people in an efficient manner. He persuaded Okoye in a logical impressive vein that he has an obligation to clear the big debts first and small money lenders like Okoye need to wait their turn. And in order to support his logical rearing Unoka

would quote an Igbo saying, “... the sun will shine on those who stand, before it shines on those who kneel under them” (TFA 7).

The comparative study of Unoka and Okonkwo by Chinua Achebe is interesting and informative. Unoka was an improvident and lazy father who made Okonkwo to undergo humiliation. People laughed at Okonkwo with contempt and derision because he was a son of an agbala, a humanly man who could not take any title of honour in accordance with the ancient custom. Unoka had nothing left to Okonkwo that he could inherit. It is only his inflexible will, self-confidence sheer courage and very hard work that brought him all the success.

Being the head of the family, Unoka must feed his family which he never did. So people treated him with contempt and ridicule because he was a do-nothing man and a lazy bum. But Okonkwo earned the respect and admiration for being a warrior, wrestler, and a successful and prosperous farmer, if Unoka is compared with Okaye who is also a musician like Unoka, the readers come to understand that Okaye is not a failure and he has a large barn full of yams and three wives and is getting ready to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land. It is only Unoka's lack of fragility and integrity, irresponsibilities and many other disgraceful negative qualities which brought him the failures. Okonkwo's misery and failure were compounded by internal and external causes and forces. Achebe has tried his level best to show his sympathy and commiseration to Unoka by putting the blame on Unoka's ill-fate, bad chi and evil fortune. It is sad to see that in the end Unoka had to die of the swelling of the stomach and the limbs and was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. Barriers of Unoka are shameful sluggishness, his barren mind devoid of flourishing thoughts about his future. These had largely impacted Okonkwo. Ravenscroft observes that “Okonkwo's personal dynamism has sprung from contempt for his improvident father, Unoka” (10).

Okonkwo's resentment of his father's “failure” dates from the former's childhood. Okonkwo's playmate infects a strong contempt in him which causes a personal dislike towards his father, Unoka. The protagonist is now in his for this still remembers, “how he had suffered when his playmate had told him that his father was agbala... not only another name for a woman (TFA 12). Okonkwo's relationship with his father was not good that the

hero had an aversion for everything his father loved : “Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved.

One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness” (TFA 13). He had few other barriers and disadvantages to face in life. His Father had not earned any earthly riches which he could possibly fall back upon and run his family. He had to support two families – his own and his father’s ) with the inadequate and insufficient income from his land. Achebe narrates that, “It was like pouring grains of corns into a bag full of holes” (TFA 21). Whenever people talk about his father, his self pride is defeated. He is always reminded of this weak, idle, poor, contemptible father. So Okonkwo strives hard to outdo his father in all respects. Okonkwo reacts over-violently against his father’s in competence, cultivating in himself all the qualities of success and suppressing everything that was like his father. He was hard to himself and merciless to his family.

Achebe’s stresses on the mental gap and the contrast between the striving Okonkwo and his irresponsible father who despises all strivings. His father Unoka hates all blood spilling strife also. Achebe’s strategies of comparing Unoka and Okonkwo brings into focus the essential aspects of the character of this great sensitive, emotional Igbo, Okonowo in contrast with his father Unoka. Okonokwo was a man of action and of war; on the other hand, his father was terrified of blood. He was a coward “Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was, in fact, a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. On the contrary, blood had a fascinating appeal which, unsurprisingly extended to his habit of collecting heads of his enemies for exhibition; it was much applauded and appreciated inn the war-mongering. Igbo community. This contrast serves to show that Okonkwo has laudable qualities, quite characteristic of a true Igbo and his father possesees everything dispised by the clan. Unoka is , in short, unashamedly ‘unigboic’.

Yet Unoka was a true Igbo in his passionate love of music, dance, singing and drinking palm-wine and feasting. In fact, in one instance, Unoka surprisingly displayed a sense of responsibility and true concern for his Okonkwo. The narrator refers to a very poor harvest when many farmers suffered and wept and one man hanged himself which may sadly remind the Indian readers of the farmers in India. Okonkwo would have suffered a lot if

Unoka had not helped him with his encouraging words by telling that Okonkwo had a manly and a proud heart. But Okonkwo was not willing to remember his father with thankfulness.

The view Ode Ogede on the character of Unoka underscores his thematic importance.”....it is he who helps Achebe to sound forth the theme of tranquillity of tribal life, of the motif of primordial innocence....”(56).Unoka’s merits rather than his lapses impress Ogede. Unoka’s habit of not taking life seriously and his leisurely life style “give his community the drama of fun, humour and love and pleasure, a touch of light-heartedness it badly lacks”(56).

## **Conclusion**

Both the individuals differ from each other in so many aspects. The father –son relationship is beautifully portrayed by Chinua Achebe by not omitting any flaws and characteristic features. He must be appreciated for that. The character of the protagonist and his father does not match at all. It should be noted that both share the Igbo values but unfortunately both perish at the end. Unoka had to go an alienated place and end his life since he had contracted a disease which the Igbo community averted and hated. Okonkwo was forced to hang himself after he killed the messenger. So his body was also not touched by his community. It is sad thing to notice that in spite of virtues and good qualities that are admired by everyone both the father and the son end at a horrific situation which certainly evoke the sympathy of the readers.

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