

## Freudian Unconscious and the Remaking of Self: An Analysis of Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* from Psychoanalytic Perspective

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### Abstract:

Okonkwo, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a very complex character with different paradoxical qualities in terms of social, cultural, political, parental, and ideological issues. His roles as a father, husband, son, leader of the clan, hero, the custodian of the would-be-sacrificing boy Ikemefuna, and his beheading of the boy lead us to a crossroad of Freudian unconscious. The unconscious, as the container of the suppressed desires caused by his father's agbala (womanish) characteristics, leads him to kill the boy as he does not want to be treated like his father. His jaundiced psychological state is responsible for breaking relation with his son Nwoye, treating his family members very unnaturally, being very aggressive in tribal issues, and finally, committing suicide after the killing of the messenger in the meeting. The irreducible autopsy of his father's failure in his practical life always functions as a Freudian Id in Okonkwo which tries to come out to demolish his past and recreate a renewed present where his father stands as a hero. My objective in this article is to show how Freudian unconscious leads Okonkwo to create a self of a hero but his heroic self is nothing but a failed attempt to recreate his father.

**Key-words:** Psychoanalytic, Unconscious, Id, Neurosis, Polymorphous.

### 1. Theoretical Background

Sigmund Freud, trained as a doctor and a therapist, "... not only invented a whole new discipline and medical mode, psychoanalysis, but also generated concepts and ideas that have had an enormous impact on literary criticism" (Nayar, 2010, p. 64). Freud, in his *A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis*, examines the unconscious in detailed form. He concentrates on the term conscious as an opposite view of the unconscious and the former is defined as the conception present in our consciousness and we are aware of it and the latter as the idea about which we know nothing. He comes to this observation with the realisation that people are not usually accustomed to accepting the

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existence of unconscious in them. In his theory, as analysed by Mary Klages (2008), he studies human psyche and discovers some governing factors which include the pleasure principle and the reality principle. She defines these terms by saying that “the pleasure principle tells us to do whatever feels good; the reality principle tells us to subordinate pleasure to what needs to be done, to work” (p. 63). Freud discusses these two terms in his *Civilisation and its Discontent* to show how they work in the core of the civilization as deciding factors. The theory concentrates on the constant war between the principles to win over one another and Freud establishes that the reality principle ultimately wins by following a psychological process called “sublimation” (Klages, 2008 p. 63). Mention should be made here that all the pleasure principles cannot be fulfilled and so, some of them are sublimated. Freud’s definition of the unconscious begins from here. He shows that the unfulfilled desires do not get extinct or die out rather they take shelter in a particular place of our minds in a suppressed or repressed condition. The space in the mind where the repressed desires reside is termed as the unconscious. Klages (2008) extends the idea by adding:

The pleasure principle makes us want to do things that feel good, while the reality principle tells to channel that energy elsewhere. But the desire for pleasure doesn’t disappear, even when it’s sublimated into work. The desire that can’t be fulfilled are packed, or *repressed*, into a particular place in the mind, which Freud labels the *unconscious*. (p. 64)

On the other hand, Nayar (2010) defines it in the following way:

The unconscious consists of repressed desires, such as the love for the mother, which has been prohibited by the law of the father where the child imagines he might be castrated by the father for loving the mother, and whose repression produces the Oedipus complex, that, in turn, leads the male child to change affections to the more powerful father, who he now sees as the symbol of authority. (p. 66)

## **2. Freudian Unconscious and Okonkwo**

Okonkwo, a Umuofian and a “folk-hero among the Igbos” (Basu, 2003, p. 7) grew up as a child in his village like other common children of the Igbo society. The society was agro-based and people had to work hard for earning their bread. Their economic success depended on their investment of their physical labour. They also believed in fatalism which refers to the dependence on fate. Fortune was a hierarchal issue in the society which was transmitted from father

to son and son to son. The protagonist of the novel *Things Fall Apart* is not so lucky regarding his father. For exploring the state of Okonkwo's unconscious, it is very important to critically analyse his father.

## 2.1 Analysis of Unoka, Okonkwo's Father

His father Unoka, a remarkably thin, tall, and slightly stoop person, "... had died ten years ago. In his day he was lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow" (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). It is not the fact that he was a loafer or evil character rather he was a very rare personality in that society concerning his exceptional characteristics. He hardly worked to earn his livelihood and if he did it, he "immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry" (Achebe, 1958, p. 4). He loved to play flute and sometimes he, along with his band, was hired by the people of other villages. He enjoyed the time with other old villagers around the log fires when there was dense haze and loved to fly kite in the dry season. Because of these qualities, his birth can be taken as rare. So, it can easily be estimated that a man with this type of romantic notion of life would inevitably be a failure in his practical life. Achebe (1958) says:

That was years ago, when he was young. Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more, piling up his debts. (p. 5)

Moreover, Unoka did not like warfare which was a must and deciding factor for internal and external affairs. He was, "in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (Achebe, 1958, 6). In Igbo society, a man's greatness was determined by the number of barns, wives, and titles he had. Unoka's life ended without achieving anything which was unwelcoming in the society. He died without having any title, any barn and having heavy debt. Mention should also be made here that his death was very abominable as he did not have his natural death. He died of swelling of his limbs. There was a rule in the Igbo society regarding the death caused by swelling of the body-limbs. Achebe (1958) records it by saying that "when a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die (Achebe, 1958, p. 17). Furthermore, this type of death was taken as an abomination to the earth goddess and was not allowed to be buried naturally. They were carried to the Evil Forest, a residence

of the ghosts and evil spirits, and left alone to die. The mother goddess Ala or Ani would provide no place for this kind of man in her womb.

### 3. Okonkwo's Unconscious

The interest regarding the unconscious in Okonkwo is deepened among the readers with Achebe's question in the text which is "any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him?" (Achebe, 1958, p. 7). Abiola Irele (2003), in his "The Tragic Conflict in the Novels of Chinua Achebe", diagnoses the psychological problem in Okonkwo by commenting that his biography is nothing but a "... psychological case" (Basu, 2003, p. 83). The shame caused by his father leads him to suffer from this psychological problem. The author of this article attempts to establish that Okonkwo's shame for his father leads him to suffer from Freudian Ids or primary desires and how these desires create neurosis in him to decide his later course of life.

The word "ashamed" (Achebe, 1958, p. 7) is very important to analyze Okonkwo psychoanalytically. He was ashamed of his father's position in the society. His psychological world was constantly moved by his father's failure. His father's existence was a constant threat and anxiety in his life. The birth of Freudian unconscious in Okonkwo takes place from the moment he realized that he was ashamed of his father's failure. He wanted to see a hero in his father who would have title, barn, more wives and children. His primary desire was to posit his father in the list of the greatest persons of his clan and in the nine villages of the Igbo society. His father's failure let people name him as an *agbala* or a woman that hurt him tremendously. When his friends called his father an *agbala* or woman, he "... first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title (Achebe, 1958, p. 13). He was helpless and his helplessness drove him to the deformity of his psychological state. This deformity refers to extreme anger, disrespect to others, endless ambition, extreme nationality and patriotism, devaluation of relationship etc. Nayar ((2010) narrates Maud Ellmann's "Textual Unconscious" (1994) to refer to the fact that unconscious not only consists of repressed desires, but also deals with "... anxieties, fears, and paranoias" (p. 69). I would like to show all of these qualities as the outburst of Freudian polymorphous desires or primary desires or Ids. These desires work in Okonkwo in the forms of achievements which his father could not attain in his life-time. He was always determined to say no to his father. By exiling his father from his psychic state, he, in reality, was trying to rebuild his father through him. Freudian theory of the unconscious assures redemption from these uncontrollable desires through

Oedipus Complex but in case of Okonkwo, it was quite impossible. His Ids led him to his death ultimately. Now, I would like to analyse the major happenings of his life with a view to unfolding his unconscious that led him to ultimate death.

#### 4. Killing of Ikemefuna and the Unconscious

The argument can be furthered by considering Okonkwo's beheading of Ikemefuna who was given to Umuofia as a compensation of the killing of a Umuofian lady by the people of Mbaino. The lady was Udo's wife and she was killed while going through Mbaino. The Umuofians reacted to this incident very severely and sent an emissary to the village to settle the issue. According to the rules of the clan, two options were given to the Mbainos which include the compensation or war. All the Igbo villages were afraid of the Umuofians as there were many warriors among them. So, the issue was settled by providing them with a virgin lady for Udo whose wife was killed and a boy who would be sacrificed in the name of the earth goddess, Ani. The boy was given in Okonkwo's custody and he was there for three years. Mention should be made here that the boy could not be slaughtered without the permission of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. After three years, the permission came and the boy must be slaughtered. It must be added here that by this time, Ikemefuna began to consider Okonkwo his father, Okonkwo's wives his mothers and his children his brothers and sisters. On the appointed day, the boy was taken outside the village by the village-elders with a pot of wine on his shoulder with the wrong information that he was taken to his family. He was full of happiness thinking of the fact that after many years, he would be able to meet his family. When they came outside the village, one of the elders took out his machet and wanted to kill him. Ikemefuna ran to Okonkwo addressing him as his father. He said, "My father, they have killed me!" (Achebe, 1958, p. 55). He thought that Okonkwo would protect him because he was his father and he "could hardly imagine that Okonkwo was not his real father" (Achebe, 1958, p. 53). The paradox is that Okonkwo did not evaluate the word 'father'. He forgot that the boy considered him father and took him as a protector. Okonkwo saw the boy running towards him for shelter but without protecting him, he "drew his machet and cut him down" (Achebe, 1958, p. 55). The incident can be paralleled to that of Iphigenia, as described by Homer in his epic the *Iliad*, whose father Agamemnon dedicated her for satisfying the goddess with a view to making his journey to Troy safe and quick. Agamemnon lied to his wife Clytemnestra informing her that he was taking his daughter to arrange her marriage with the greatest hero of the Trojan War Achilles. Thus, Agamemnon was condemned by the gods and

goddesses and he got his punishment by being killed in the hands of his wife. Okonkwo's end was also not very welcoming like that of Agememnon. He committed suicide.

Again, Freudian idea of suppressed desire in the unconscious is to be taken into consideration for analyzing this psychological dilemma of a person who killed a boy that called him father. As the reason of the Okonkwo's killing of the boy, Achebe's observation is that he killed the boy because he "was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe, 1958, p. 55). The phrase 'being thought weak' leads us to the common people's analysis of his father. Okonkwo was afraid of the other clansmen's justification of his action. He was afraid of the fact that he might be compared with his father if he did not kill the boy for his love for him. He did not want to prove himself like his father. In that crucial moment, his suppressed desires caused by his father's failure guided him and compelled him to kill the boy. Though his action can be glorified with the judgment that he prioritized his collective responsibility by ignoring his personal affiliation with the boy, my argument is that he killed the boy because he was a psychologically imbalanced person. His suppressed desires came out of his unconscious and motivated him to do his desired job so that he could negate his father's self. Freud, in his process of psychoanalysis, defines the excessive obsession with the pleasure principle as neurosis. So, it is undoubtedly true that Okonkwo was neurotic and in the state of an imbalanced mind, he killed the boy.

##### **5. A Ruling Father and Husband and the Unconscious in Okonkwo**

As a father and husband, Okonkwo was very rude and commanding. According to Achebe, Okonkwo "ruled his household with a heavy hand" (Achebe, 1958, p. 13). He took the words such as gentleness and idleness as sins because his father was very gentle and idle. He was like a psychic patient as he hated everything "that his father Unoka loved" (Achebe, 1958, p. 13). The outburst of his imbalanced psychic condition becomes apparent with the author's observation that he suffered from constant anxiety and tension that he should not be "found to resemble his father" (Achebe, 1958, p. 13). He never expressed the soft side of his mind for his wives and children just because his father was soft and loving. This creates the suppressed desire in him that he must rule others because his father was not able to do this. He designed his own vision regarding the recreation of his father in the way he wanted and desired and that is how he expressed his suppressed desires. Mention should be made here that his desires were unnatural and illogical because they were guided by pleasure principles which are not socially, culturally, politically, ideologically,

and religiously accepted. Here, I would like to argue that he controlled his family strictly not to put everyone in balanced position rather he did it to accelerate his desire of killing his father ideologically. He did it because his father did not do it. In this way, his positive qualities become the expression of his imbalanced psychological state. Achebe rightly observes that “it (fear) was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father” (Achebe, 1958, p. 13).

His great quality of working hard in his barns caused severe problems for the other members of the family. He was not compassionate at all to them who accompanied him in the agricultural activities. He believed in the fact that everybody of the family must work hard. It is truly a wonderful quality possessed by him but my argument is that his unconscious was responsible for this kind of tendency. His father’s failure in life constantly pushes him to come to the conclusion that a person’s existence is nothing but a big zero if he does not work hard. If his tendency is psychologically analysed, a horrible truth about him comes out. The truth is that it is not he who commanded the rest of the members of the family rather his father’s ghost in the form of repressed desire motivated him to be so harsh with them. His true psychic condition becomes transparent if his treatment to his eldest son Nwoye, who, according to him, resembled his father mostly, is taken into consideration. Okonkwo was never tolerant about his son. He constantly beat him. Thus, Okonkwo became an African lion in the family and to him, the most important family-ideology was to forget his father’s existence. For this, he “never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger” (Achebe, 1958, p. 26). In addition, Nwoye’s conversion into Christianity is another proof of his harshness to the family members. What my argument is that Okonkwo’s ideology about his family members was guided by the suppressed desires he possessed which was the result of his father’s frailty in his personal life.

### **5.1 Okonkwo’s Family Affairs and his Unconscious**

The text can be analysed further to establish the fact that Okonkwo suffered from Freudian suppressed desires because of his father’s incapacity of establishing himself as a successful man in his lifetime. In his seven-year exile, his daughters grew up and his second wife Ekwefi’s daughter Ezinma was called Crystal of Beauty. There were many suitors for her in Mbanta but she did not accept any proposal affirmatively. She kept the words given to her father Okonkwo as her father wanted her and her sister to choose suitors from Umuofia. He said, “There are many good and prosperous people here, but I

shall be happy if you marry in Umuofia when we return home" (Achebe, 1958, p. 157). What I would like to argue is that he was not guided by his patriotism or love for his countrymen rather he wanted to prove his greatness by attracting the public attention. Achebe observes this by saying that he "was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years" (Achebe, 1958, p. 155). In order to make his return remarkable, he would build a larger barn and have two more new huts for two new wives. Moreover, he decided to let people know about his economic capacity and he would do it by "initiating his sons into the ozo society" (Achebe, 1958, p. 155) which required a lot of money. His ill and selfish motif of showmanship becomes justified from the author's observation in which he says, "Okonkwo saw clearly the high esteem in which he would be held, and he saw himself taking the highest title in the land" (Achebe, 1958, p. 155). A solid analysis of his motif establishes the fact that he was very concerned regarding his aristocracy and wide-acceptance in his clan. For achieving this position in the society, he designed all the policies. He had to be great and he was ready to do everything for implementing his dream. My argument is that he was not a national hero for his extreme affiliation with his native land rather he channeled all of his energy to forget the fear of being a loser like his father. His suppressed desire influenced him psychologically which led him to behave like a hero of his clan.

## **5.2. Okonkwo's Suicide and the Unconscious**

Finally, it is Okonkwo who was responsible for his own end in the most abominable way. As one of the leaders of the clan, he is expected that he would behave more responsibly in settling the problem with the English. After the killing of the sacred python by Enoch, the son of the snake priest, the Umuofians were very quick in destroying the red-earth Church built by Mr. Brown, the white missionary. They could have followed a different way to negotiate the matter with the white Christians. After the destruction of the Church, Okonkwo's reaction is very remarkable. Achebe expresses it by saying, "for the first time in many years Okonkwo had a feeling that was akin to happiness" (Achebe, 1958, p. 173). Okonkwo felt that:

The times which had altered so unaccountably during his exile seemed to be coming round again. The clan which had turned false on him appeared to be making amends... It was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior. Although they had not agreed to kill the missionary or drive away the Christians, they had agreed to do something substantial. And they had done it Okonkwo was almost happy again. (Achebe, 1958, p. 155)

It was undoubtedly a nationalistic zeal which led the Umuofian leaders to take proper action against the white missionaries. But if Okonkwo's observation is explicated, the truth about a self-glorifying person comes out. There are statements such as 'seemed to be coming round again' and 'it was like the good old days' in his evaluation of the incident. The statements, unquestionably, refer to his own definition of glorification. If objectively analysed, this brand of thought is nothing but the expression of his suppressed fear caused by his father. He again and again tried to hint upon old gold days referring to his own heroism just to demolish his father's self and recreate an alter-ego of his father.

His killing of the messenger in the Market Place can also be taken as an immature step as it was not a personal war against the white missionaries but he could not resist himself in proving his own worth to the people of his locality. When the messenger went there to inform them about the instruction given by the white missionary, Okonkwo "drew his matchet... descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body" (Achebe, 1958, p. 184). His observation about the reaction of his native people was clear that they would not go to war against the missionaries. With prior knowledge of his people's motif, he killed the messenger with a view to proving his heroism and my argument is that he did it because his father's abominable character worked in him as suppressed desire and he must come out of this by proving his heroism. This is how, his fake heroism in the form of suppressed desire led him to commit suicide. His committing suicide was an extreme outburst of his suppressed desire of not being proved to be a failure, an *agbala* or a woman like his father.

## 6. Conclusion

Freudian psychoanalysis is a recurrent issue in the analysis of literature. There are many issues discussed in his theory but the essay deals with his idea of the unconscious. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been analysed in the light of Freudian theory of the unconscious in which suppressed desires in the form of Ids or primary or polymorphous desires or pleasure principles guide the protagonist to exercise heroism throughout his life. His father is the central cause of his suppressed desires and he is continuously guided and motivated by his father's failure to determine his course of life. His activities as a father, a husband, a clansman, a warrior, a leader, and above all, a nationalist hero are motivated by his father's shadowy existence in him. Even he commits suicide because he does not want to be treated an *agbala* like his father. Thus, Okonkwo's course of life is determined by his father in the form of suppressed

desires. Because of this, he kills Ikemefuna, humiliates his clansman, rules his house with strong hands, cuts relation with his son Nwoye, fights against the white people, beheads the messenger, and subsequently, commits suicide for not being hanged by the white people.

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