

# Resistance of Achebe's 'Heroes' Okonkwo and Obi Okonkwo: Defeated in the Flux of Nigerian Society?

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the resistance of Achebe's two 'heroes' Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, and Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*. While Okonkwo takes up arms to preserve culture and tradition in a "things fall apart society", Obi Okonkwo's honesty and his love for Clara remain constant with him and he is "no longer at ease" in the flux of colonial Nigeria. In pre-colonial Nigeria, Okonkwo's resistance to the white man's religion, education and technology is defeated and Obi's desire for a corrupt-free Nigeria fails during British colonial rule. In line with this development, we find Okonkwo's son converting to Christianity. Eventually, Okonkwo commits suicide realizing that he is going to be defeated. However, the history of resistance does not end here and Okonkwo's and Obi's apparent defeats have far-reaching implications for Africa's subsequent anti-colonial struggle.

Because of his involvement in apartheid activities, Nelson Mandela, the South African leader, suffered bitterly for a long period of his life only to eventually help free South Africa from colonial rule. Though he had to stay in jail for more than twenty-seven years, he was finally successful in his mission. We can call him a "Hero" in this sense. This paper analyzes how Okonkwo, the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart*, and Obi, the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*, resist and struggle to preserve an idyllic Nigeria. Though their efforts fail, it is not the end of the history of struggle for freedom since their apparent defeat is actually a step towards victory over colonial rule. 'Resistance' is a common human tendency. Whenever a group of intruders dominate people in settled lands, those people struggle to free themselves from bondage. In colonial relations of power, we often notice how the struggle for freedom continues even after subjugation and defeat.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said says: "After the period of 'primary resistance', literally fighting against outside intrusion, there comes the period of secondary, that is, ideological resistance, when efforts are made to reconstitute a 'shattered community, to save or restore the sense and fact of community against all the pressures of the colonial system'" (209). Okonkwo embodies someone at the vanguard of the period of the 'primary resistance' who takes up arms to restore the values of his society, but Obi accepts colonial domination and challenges only its corruption, which is the act of someone involved in 'secondary resistance'. However, both do not get justice in their lifetime. The oppressed are victims and even when they resist, they often cannot articulate decisively what they want to say. Okonkwo and Obi are thus two victims of a society in continuous flux. Both resist but the resistance of Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, and Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease*, is weakened not only by the continuous unrest and violence of the people of pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria but also by the members of their own families. In the end, their fruitless resistance leads to their downfall. Both think about the welfare of the people in a way that goes against the values of their contemporaries. While Okonkwo tries to conserve Igbo culture and tradition in a "things fall apart society", Obi Okonkwo becomes upset with the corruption of colonial society. In his pre-colonial society Okonkwo's resistance crumbles against the white man's religion, education and technology; even the Christian god takes the place of the Igbo god at one point. Obi Okonkwo's desire for a beautiful, corruption-free Nigeria fails during British colonialism. Okonkwo is shocked when he sees his son Nwoye turn into a follower of western ideas. Ultimately, Okonkwo commits suicide when he perceives he is going to be defeated. On the other hand, Obi takes a bribe to pay back the huge loan he had taken and is arrested at last. Individually Okonkwo represents active resistance and Obi passive resistance. Okonkwo is the victim of pre-colonial changes in society and Obi of changes in Nigerian colonial society. Nevertheless, their individual defeats do not amount to failure in the ultimate analysis as their resistance becomes exemplary to the next generation who strive to counter corruption.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo resists the white man's rule in his domain. Since he is the head of his clan it is insulting to his masculinity to be subjugated by others. To some extent, of course, Okonkwo's resistance is due to his fear of losing societal status. Thus we can say that Okonkwo's ability to resist affirms his existence. That is why British colonial rule was too much for him to tolerate and why the white men became his worst enemies. Their rule become unacceptable to him and lead him to him committing suicide. Angela Smith says: "Okonkwo [is] conforming too rigorously to tribal conception of manliness" (17) because "he feels intense personal bitterness against all white men for what they have done to his family" (20). Okonkwo's resistance is against British rule; however, he fails to develop this resistance into a meaningful revolt because of his impetuous personality.

Contrariwise, Obi is already the beneficiary of a colonial education, and so his resistance is not against colonialism but against corruption in postcolonial society. During a job interview, when Obi is asked whether he will take a bribe while working, he becomes furious and thinks that this custom of giving bribes should be changed. When his friend,

Joseph opposes his behavior, especially during his interview, he says: “Nonsense! That’s what I call colonial mentality” (37). That is how he starts resisting against the remnants of colonialism in his society, even though he is defeated and cannot live up to his ideals at the end. Nevertheless, his desire for resistance is praiseworthy.

Noticeably, when Okonkwo resists the colonizers, he faces problems from his surroundings since he does not get support from anyone in his clan. Nobody in his village supports his stand since most people feel they will not get anything by being honest. The villagers in general are caught between resisting and embracing change and face the dilemma of people caught between tradition and change. They are excited about the ‘new world order’ on view. Most villagers are excited about the new opportunities and techniques that the missionaries bring. This European influence, however, threatens to eliminate the need for traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building, and cooking. Okonkwo feels helpless in this modernizing society. Bruce King contends in his essay ‘Thoughts on Okonkwo, His Flaws and Society’ thus:

Okonkwo is destroyed, and brings ruin on others, because he is excessive in his adherence to the values of his society; those who can compromise, change with the times and adjust, are seen as more sensible. This does not make Okonkwo any less tragic or heroic. Despite Achebe’s objective manner of narration, [Okonkwo is] portrayed with sympathy and achieve noble stature in the course of the novel; the principles [he upholds] are also seen as noble and engage our sympathies. But such principles are often flawed and inherently unsound in the face of social change. . . . Okonkwo thinks about the new world order. Okonkwo, for example, resists the new political and religious orders because he feels that they are not manly and that he himself will not be manly if he consents to join or even tolerate them. (1)

Therefore, Okonkwo’s resistance is against his community’s embrace of imperialist culture. For his part, Obi too is also alone even though his loneliness comes from being in an unstable situation in a corrupt society. Whereas Okonkwo wants to preserve tradition, Obi tries to bring changes he believes are necessary for Nigerian society. For example, he wants a new class of educated people replacing the set of old corrupted ones in different social fields. In chapter two of *No Longer at Ease* we even find him taking a stand against his friend Joseph. He has this to say about the men in administration: “The Civil Service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top” (17). But the irony is that he cannot bring change in the real sense of the word by removing these men from their posts.

One of the weakest points in Okonkwo’s resistance in *Things Fall Apart* is fear. Okonkwo is shocked when he finds out that his own son Nwoye has gone against him. It bothers him more than anything else in the world that his own son, who symbolizes his future, is in league with the colonizers. He is indeed shocked to find his very existence in danger because of his own son Nwoye. Okonkwo becomes furious when he hears of

Nwoye's plan of converting to Christianity. Outraged, he says to Nwoye: "Answer me, before I kill you!" He seized a heavy stick that lay on the dwarf wall and hit him two or three savage blows" (107). Willene P. Taylor has this to say about this scene: "Ironically, it is Okonkwo's obsession with the adherence to the Ibo Value system which causes him to lose his son, Nwoye, to the European way of life" (31). His beating of Nwoye is a part of his attempt to resist the encroachment of the colonizers.

On the other hand, Obi's need for money becomes the weakest point of his life. He takes bribe not out of greed, but because of his debt to the Umuofia Progressive Union, which he has had to take for scholarship. At the same time he has to support his poor parents. This circumstance always troubles him, no matter how much effort he uses to get rid of this condition. It is money for which he is in trouble at the end; therefore, he takes a bribe and becomes a victim. The first and the last bribe in his life destroy all his idealistic concepts at his work place as well as his own image as an honest worker.

Unfortunately, both Obi's and Okonkwo's resistance fails because of certain changes among people around them, both in pre-colonial and colonial situations. They are extremely surprised to find out that no one in their society thinks the way they do. Their reactions also show their unrealistic way of looking at life because they cannot keep pace with the flow of life in their society. For example, when Obi talks about marriage to Clara, an 'Osu' girl, i.e. an outcast, he cannot accept the fact that according to his people's tradition he could not marry an outcast. He promises to marry her, though both Clara and his friend, Joseph, understand easily that in a traditional society a sudden change like marrying an Osu girl is not desirable. As far as his marriage is concerned, he thinks that it is ridiculous that anyone should object to his marrying a girl from another tribe. Therefore, he resists everybody on this issue. He feels that his education has made him a stranger in his own country. When Obi shares his desires of marrying Clara with Joseph, the latter is filled with dismay at Obi's not realizing what it would mean to the Umuofians for him to marry an outcast and someone who is not an Osu like Clara. For his part, Obi cannot understand why it is so important that Clara should suffer because of her ancestry. Joseph says that it is not yet time for such a drastic move but Obi declares that not even his mother could stop him from this marriage. Nevertheless, Joseph insists that his entire family plus all the Umuofians would be against it. In the end, Obi has to change his decision in order to keep his sick mother alive and happy.

We can note too that Okonkwo's anger is the result of his insecurity regarding his father's lack of masculine qualities. Okonkwo's relationship with his late father shapes much of his violent and ambitious demeanor. He wants to oppose the consequences of his father's extravagance and indolent behavior for he believed his father to be weak and perceived him to be feminine. According to the clan's language, the word for a man who has not won any expensive and prestigious titles is *agbala*, which also means "woman." However, Okonkwo's idea of manliness is not limited by the clan's perception. He associates masculinity with aggression and thinks that anger is the only emotion that he should display as a man. For this reason, he frequently beats his wives and threatens to kill them from time to time. He

does not think about such things, and we see him acting impetuously. In an essay titled "Criticism" Robert Bennett says:

Another way to analyze the psychological dimensions of Okonkwo's character is to examine how he constructs his sense of gender by asserting a strong sense of masculinity and repressing any sense of femininity. Just as there is an external psychological conflict between Okonkwo and his father, there is also an internal psychological conflict between the masculine and feminine sides within Okonkwo. While Okonkwo's hyper-masculinity initially enables him to achieve success as a great wrestler and warrior, his refusal to balance this masculine side with feminine virtues eventually contributes to his later destruction. (3)

Therefore, it is not only his father's feminine image but also his internal feminine side, which is responsible for his downfall. On the other hand, Obi's defeat takes to a position from which it is hard for him to escape, no matter how much and how he resists. In the end, he is compelled to take a bribe. Although he does so, he always carries a guilty feeling with him and this is why he is eventually arrested. Ironically, the bribe that he takes reluctantly becomes evidence for his arrest.

As Okonkwo is alone and everybody in his clan supports British rule in order to get back his position as the head of his clan, he becomes infuriated as well as envious of British colonial rule. Alan R Frieson comments on Okonkwo thus:

Two years later when the missionaries have established a mission in Mbanta, he discovers that his son has converted into this new religion and has forsworn the customs of his ancestors. When Okonkwo considers this new situation, "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" (Achebe 142). At first, Okonkwo dismisses the villagers of Abame as foolish for not being prepared for an ambush, but after seeing the "demasculating" effects of the white man, first-hand he realizes that the situation is much more grave than he at first believes.(4)

As a result, he is ready to kill anybody who supports the white men's rule. He cannot believe that in his absence the people became weaker than he had expected, so he is ready to kill anybody who supports colonial rule. His *chi* or spirit is not against him when he kills the court messenger who announces that he should not have a meeting with his people. Okonkwo kills him because he is attempting to uphold the culture of his people in the face of impending colonization. In *the Wretched of the Earth* Fanon says: "The colonized man is an envious man. . . . It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place" (30). Therefore, Okonkwo acts in this vehement way to take revenge at having his position taken away. In contrast, Obi is in some way inactive as far as resistance is concerned. For Obi resistance takes place most of the time only in his thoughts and not in his actions. Ode Ogede says: "Through Obi Okonkwo, an

unsuspecting individual, who is a product of that education, Achebe graphically illustrates the mental anguish that an unsuitable educational system causes its African victims” (53). If we think about his decision to marry Clara, we see that when his mother compels him to not to marry her, he becomes helpless. He cannot go beyond that limitation as he is bound to do whatever his mother tells him to do, or in other words, what his society compels him to do. It is because of his mother that he cannot marry Clara, although he and Clara had already established both a physical as well as a mental relationship.

Then again in *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo returns home from exile to his home, it seems that the old customs have returned. The hero seems to have come back to resist the colonial power as if he is in accordance with what Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* has said, “The man of action has sometimes the exhausting impression that he must restore the whole of his people, that he must bring every one of them up out of the pit and out of the shadows” (237). But unfortunately when Okonkwo comes back to his village he is shocked to see that his own people are supporting the new religion and viewing their own customs as superstition. In this context Alan R Friesen says:

He is saddened because his people have “so unaccountably become soft like women” and have lost their martial spirit. Tension between the church and the village escalates until finally Enoch, a convert, tears off the mask of an *egwugwu*, killing an ancestral spirit. The village retaliates by burning the church to the ground, which redeems the village in Okonkwo’s eyes: “[i]t was like the good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior”. With Okonkwo back in the village, it seems as if the clan is returning to its war-like state, and he has reason to hope that the village might actually gain enough courage to “kill the missionary and drive away the Christians”. (5)

Therefore, the converts of Igbo society no longer believe in the ancestral spirit known as *egwugwu* in their language. But this change in them serves only to make Okonkwo more furious. He is shocked to see that “the clan had undergone such profound change during his exile that its way of life was barely recognizable” (129). He is deeply grieved and he mourns “for the warlike men of Umuofia” [who have] “so unaccountably become soft like woman”(129).

In Chapter 8 of *No Longer at Ease* we find that the Umuofia Progressive Union is against Obi’s decision to marry Clara. Obi is offended by the behavior of the members of the union and thinks his marriage to Clara should be none of their business. Becoming proud and angry at the same time he says: “This is preposterous! I could take you to court for that . . . for that . . . for that” (75). He cannot believe that the Union, which is supposed to be progressive in nature has not progressed in its mentality and way of thinking. Obi’s Nigeria, to borrow Salman Rushdie’s phrase, is an “imaginary homeland” for him whereas in reality it is no more than a slum in which the slum-dwellers are being corrupted. In her essay “Crisis in the Soul in Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*”, Dr. Jaya Lakshmi Rao V says:

With the advent of the white man there is a loss of native values such as communal harmony, placing society above self, respect for the aged and reverence for achievers, which resulted in the absence of self-analysis and a stable code of ethics in the society of pre-independent Nigeria. Lured by western-education and well-paid jobs, the youth of the country do not hesitate to stoop to the levels of immorality and dangerous permissiveness.

Obi's disillusionment sets in when he perceives the difference between imagination and reality. Obi refuses the bribe that Mr. Mark offers him to get a scholarship for his sister, and by rejecting it Obi finds that he has overcome the corruption in existing society. Feeling like a tiger, he thinks that he can continue such rejection and temptation in future and thus resist a corrupt society. Later, when Miss Mark comes and offers him her body, he refuses her offer too. Obi resists everything including money, although he has to pay the loan and give ten pounds to his parents as well as pay his brother John's fees. In spite of being in financial stress and obligation, he resists as much as he can. Obi is elated at his conquest and, at this point, does not foresee his future experience of corruption that would tarnish his honor.

In contrast, Okonkwo's resistance takes him towards tragedy and death. In his youth, Okonkwo was a famous wrestler and was sometimes even compared to a supernatural being, and now he cannot accept subjugation. Okonkwo "suddenly realizes that his chi is determined to lead him into disaster and shame. Therefore, he takes his own life in order to end it all" (77). Okonkwo's resistance comes because he thinks death is better than submission to the white colonizer. Bruce F. Macdonald claims that Okonkwo kills himself because the only other option is ignominious death at the hands of the white man. Nevertheless, Okonkwo's resistance is seen by Igbo society as a crime. Although *Things Fall Apart* can be seen in the tragic mode, the novel is much more meaningful if we interpret Okonkwo's suicide as an act of willful resistance rather than an act of shame and dishonor. In this context, Fanon's observation is worth mentioning: "The Negro is never so much a Negro as since he has been dominated by the whites, when he decides to prove that he has a culture and to behave like a cultured person . . . he must demonstrate that a Negro culture exists" (170). Nwoye is lost and other people of this society have lost their identity as Igbo, but if we think of Okonkwo's death as his resistance it appears that Igbo culture has somehow survived and it had not wholly fallen apart. When Okonkwo kills the court messenger his people are reluctant to seize the other messengers, which suggests that they will not in the end go to war. In other words, others would not support Okonkwo's acts of resistance. Similarly, Obi cannot cope with changes in contemporary social values. As a member of a powerful, disillusioned age of corruption, Obi himself cannot resist taking a bribe in the end. As Dr. Jaya Lakshmi Rao writes: "While old values like courage and valour are no longer valid, the educated native's condition like that of Obi is charged with tragic undertones and is worse than that of his brothers in the bush".

His education has created certain a distance between him and his people who are unable to understand him anymore. Obi's uneasiness is created because he feels he is a misfit in society. Obi is an idealistic young man who wants to bring change to his

homeland. He talks against the corruption that goes on in his country. He also places himself, without compromise, against bribery. Obi's theory of corruption in the Nigerian Government is that as long as there are "old Africans" running public service positions, there will be corruption. He thinks that young and university-educated people need to take up those posts. When he is asked during his interview whether he wants the job to take bribes, Obi becomes furious at the suggestion. He tries to go past the superstition of his society by attempting to marry an outcast like Clara. Unfortunately, he eventually becomes the loser because he can neither marry Clara nor escape taking a bribe to give Clara money for the abortion of their love-child, in addition to giving money to the Umuofia Progressive Union and his family. These developments result in his arrest and humiliation.

Thus Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* present two 'heroes' who do not get justice, since their resistance is weak and futile because of the changes taking place in their respective societies. Nevertheless, their apparent defeat starts a line of resistance for the next generation to follow so that they can continue the struggle for their identity. Okonkwo and Obi Okonkwo resist, but ultimately their resistance is defeated since they live in societies which do not support them. Despite being the leader of the clan Okonkwo does not get the respect he deserves from his people and Obi, whose nickname could have been 'Honesty', ends up being dishonest by taking bribes to repay the heavy load of a loan. They resist the social system, and the values of contemporary society but fail to achieve their goals. Perhaps for Obi it was his fate to live a life of struggle where he would never be at ease. For Okonkwo it was his fate to kill himself and for Obi it was his destiny to end with his surrender to the evil customs of his society. Thus they both become in a sense the 'wretched of the earth'.

Nevertheless, Okonkwo's and Obi's apparent defeat must have far-reaching implications for Africa's subsequent anti-colonial struggle. In *Black Heroes* Jim Haskins says:

Throughout Africa's tumultuous history, certain individuals have fought against the odds to make a difference for their people. Some were strong conquerors while others were determined to bring about change through peaceful means. But all were figures whose charisma, bravery, and vision are legendary. African Heroes brings their stories to life. . . . from ancient Africa to the empire-building era, from battles against European incursion to twentieth-century efforts for nationalism . . . men and women who fought for this land.

In order to uphold Africa's nationalism many Okonkwos and Obis were later born in Africa who would bring revolutionary changes to African society. Therefore, although Okonkwo's and Obi's resistance appear to be futile, their failure would not defer the next generation from finding them heroic for their resistance. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault says:



Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. And it is doubtless the strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships.(96)

Surely, their resistance of Okonkwo and Obi helped build the web that would entangle the future leaders who would continue to struggle against future oppression.

In conclusion it can be said that both Okonkwo and Obi suffered a lot in their lifetime. It is possible to see Okonkwo symbolizing active resistance and Obi passive resistance. In pre-colonial Africa, Okonkwo was trying to resist European colonialism with all his strength. On the other hand, in post-colonial Africa, Obi was resisting the corruption and immorality in society to preserve traditional values. For Obi to be a part of active resistance was impossible because his resistance was mainly inward. However, both became victims at the end. No doubt they were types of men destined to suffer for their actions; however, their resistance had the power to spread the fire of resistance amidst the next generation of Africans. They may have been defeated heroes, but they were not ultimately defeated if their resistance is considered in broader terms. Since their spark of resistance ignited the soul of other heroes who went on to fight for freedom successfully.

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