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Okonkwo as a Hero in Hi-story:

A Study of *Things Fall Apart*

Yukinori Murata

Achebe's most well known essay is on Joseph Conrad. Descriptions of Africa in *Heart of Darkness* repelled him and made him to write the critical essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" in 1975. In this essay he starts arguments from the point that the racism in Western cultural domain had such a strong affect on Conrad's writing that he cannot confer humanity on African people.

He wrote like this:

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Joseph Conrad was a thoroughgoing racist. That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked. (Achebe *Hopes and Impediments* 11-12)

Such a phrase like "thoroughgoing racist" shows that Achebe laid strong emphasis on the responsibility of author. This kind of attitude that makes author be a center of matter can be found in other essays. For example, in "The Novelist as Teacher", he said:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is, after all ... the sensitive point of his community. (HI 45)

This passage mainly mentions about the African writer, but above all he claims that every writer should play a moralistic part in his or her community as an individual. There are some points in his whole essays which imply that he regarded the author's will as more important than the bias implicated in the intellectual domain. Surely he wrote like this in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*":

Naturally, Conrad is a dream for psychoanalytic critics. . . . yet not even one word is spared for his attitude to black people. . . . Which only leads one to surmise that Western psychoanalysts must regard the kind of racism displayed by Conrad as absolutely normal despite the profoundly important work done by Frantz Fanon in the psychiatric hospitals of French Algeria. (HI 14)¹

He discerned clearly that there was the certain group of ideas that had compulsive power to restrict one's faculty of cognition, or to give frameworks for conformity, in the intellectual field such as psychology. But Achebe didn't follow and deepen this argument. If anything, he returned to analysis of Conrad himself on the basis of psychology.

It was certainly not his fault that he lived his life at a time when the reputation of the black man was at a particularly low level. But even after due allowances have been made for all the influences of contemporary prejudice on his sensibility, there remains still in Conrad's attitude a residue of antipathy to black people which his peculiar psychology alone can explain. . . . Certainly Conrad had a problem with niggers. His inordinate love of that word itself should be of interest to psychoanalytic. . . . so unrelenting is Conrad's obsession. (HI 13)

He adhered to concentrating the whole matters on the personal mentality of Conrad. Namely, he adhered to individualism. Or, more precisely, it can be said that he adhered to be a humanist. Such an attachment to humanism is one of the reasons why he could not stand for dehumanization of African people, and also, I think, why he could not help pursuing Conrad's own mentality—especially as a human.

I think such humanism is both the fountain of creative work and the limitation for consideration in his case. He must create his African character humanly to excess willy-nilly. How did he humanize his characters? He realized it by using psychological methods. As quoted above, he regarded psychology as the versatile ground for analysis of human in reality and fiction alike. So, conversely, if he wants to create a realistic human character, he must choose psychologically convincing background.

Put simply, Chinua Achebe is a thoroughgoing humanist. Achebe has a tendency to think highly of individual humanity when he thinks about the relation of Africa and the Western. Both for the object on which African images are displayed (namely, characters in fiction) and for the cause of producing African images (Author) he is apt to assume a concrete human figure. And for him the most unbiased, most transparent, most scientific referential background for realizing humanity theoretically is psychology. The strong nexus between humanity and psychology is one of the important conditions for Achebe when he tries to create his characters humanly in his works. I think that is the reason why Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, must have been told in the schema associated to that nexus.

What needs to be emphasized at this juncture is that I never animadvert Achebe since he is a humanist. To dispraise

Achebe as a humanist is almost the same as to dispraise Conrad as a racist, in respect of considering a person as a responsible subject—this standpoint is for itself just too humanistic, like that of Achebe. If I continue to investigate authorial intention further, I hardly escape this paradox. Therefore, rather I'd like to put it into argument what kind of psychological method he used to make Okonkwo acquire humanity.

First of all, it should be confirmed whether Achebe's aim to make Okonkwo be a character regarded as a "real human" was accomplished or not. Let me cite a seemingly most commonplace quotation that is concerning to that matter.

Of course, a character who displays nothing but good qualities of one sort would be rather flat and uninteresting, ... Achebe does not make Okonkwo all good and noble, without any flaws, but he takes pains to make him fully rounded and believable, a real human being.... (York Notes on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* 40)

The above-mentioned passage is quoted from a study guides of *Things Fall Apart* for high school students. Therefore this too much general explanation is suitable for rather wide-ranging, inexpert readers than the critics.² To this case, the above quotation may account for his success in making his character as a "real human", seemingly.

But there is the problem that we should not overlook around this argument. The passage is placed at the extension of the sentences that define Okonkwo as a "hero". There, he is compared to the traditional, archaic hero that is "a man of great nobility and courage, who fights bravely and whose feats have become almost legendary amongst his people" (York Notes 40): namely, it is a stereotype of hero. This writer fixes Okonkwo in historical and archaic context for the first time,

and then dips up and revalues him on a pretext of a “real human” through nitpicking his faults and flaws. It is similar to the attitude toward the ancient people of classic age or the savage people in non-Western regions, for example, saying that “yes, they are uncivilized people, but even they have humanity to some extent”. Namely, Achebe’s African character is again dehumanized by another stereotype image: that of hero. It seems reasonable to conclude that his effort is of no use at least to undermine the structure producing the stereotypes in succession. This image of “hero” is, similar to that of the noble savage which is dominant and long time inherited in colonial discourse.

Individual acceptance of Okonkwo, whether as a hero or a human or else, has never been able to escape from being influenced by the group of ideas concerning to colonialism. The way of acceptance like the study guide that I quoted above is a typical one. But, it is not limited to reader’s response that to be exposed to the pressure of colonial discourse. Both readers and authors are involved in the interdependent activity to let their texts obtain strongly combined referential power on a dominant ideology; in this case, it is colonialism. And I think there is the factor that is so easy to respond to the colonial discourse that let Okonkwo be interpreted as an archaic hero: it is the property of history invaded in this text. And it operates around the family relations surrounding Okonkwo. So, I need to start my argument from focusing on Okonkwo and his family.

If we could survey the whole text, we should find that there are amazing amount of descriptions of family, both direct and indirect, in *Things Fall Apart*. Moreover, during exposed to a large quantity of repetitions of family images, one may note the density of a single concept of relationship in this text. To

ascertain it, I must follow the main story that arranges multiple relationships surrounding Okonkwo into one and highlights a single thread: a father-son relationship.

First, I have to begin with investigation of the relation between Okonkwo and his father.

He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father. (Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 4)

This passage is quoted from chapter one, the very start of the book. Before these sentences, there are only brief descriptions about Okonkwo, and this is the first time his sentiment to his kinship is referred. A sufficient amount of explanations about Unoka, his father, follows hereafter; more than half of the chapter is spared for explaining him. In chapter two,

It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father.... And so, Okonkwo was ruled by one passion—to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. (13)

Okonkwo was afraid of becoming a weak, coward and lazy man like his father. He was afraid of being called, in Igbo word, *agbala* as his father. In his community as depicted in this novel, the man without title was not acknowledged as a man. According to the glossary of Igbo words, the word *agbala* had two meanings: woman; and a disqualified man from being a member of men folk. Namely, in this context, woman was identified with “the person who is not a man”.³ Woman was, in a sense, a passive gender defined itself by men in that narrative.

It is entirely natural for reader to recall a patriarchal institution or an Oedipus complex (in common parlance) from this quotation.

There is another important example of a father-son relation Okonkwo concerned.

Okonkwo's first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth. (13)

There is similar strain between Okonkwo and Nwoye as between Unoka and Okonkwo. Okonkwo was hard to Nwoye, for he was convinced that Nwoye has the same temperament with Unoka, and was afraid that he might become the weak, lazy and effeminate person: *agbala*.

“...I am worried about Nwoye. . . my children do not resemble me.” (59)

What Okonkwo hoped for was the future that his male children grew up to be such manly personages like him that could take leadership of the clan in their generation: in other words, he wanted to establish a solid patriarchal pedigree. But, they, especially Nwoye, could not realize their father's will. They were not as strong as their father.

“Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I [Okonkwo] was already fending for myself. No, my friend, he is not too young. . . I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him.”

“Too much of his grandfather [Unoka],” Obierika thought, but he did not say it. The same thought also came to Okonkwo's mind. (60)

Such a patriarchal pedigree like Okonkwo conceived of is inclined to pursue the pure duplication between generations from fore to hind, as an ultimate purpose. The mixture of impure ingredient, such as feminine factor, must be evaded here. The dialogue above mentioned includes the paradoxical attitude that recommends the intercourse with woman on the one hand, and meanwhile, that fears the hybridization with femininity on the other. This paradox, by contraries, demonstrates how valuable for him that pedigree should be solidly maintained as a single thread, and also, how it is intolerable for him to acknowledge he is the son of *agbala*. But, unfortunately for him, his son, Nwoye, was much similar to his father, Unoka.

As mentioned above, a tense relation between father and son seems to become a principal thread of the narrative. The father-son relation making Okonkwo as a junction is repeated between an adopted son Ikemefuna and Okonkwo. Nwoye and Ikemefuna became good friends because they were at close age. Ikemefuna knew a lot of things and was good at music and storytelling. And, even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy, though Ikemefuna was provided with the interests much similar to that of Unoka, Okonkwo's hateful father; such as loving music and stories. Nevertheless, Okonkwo was very much fond of Ikemefuna. Ikemefuna "had begun to feel like a member of Okonkwo's family" gradually during three years. Yet, this lad was killed by Okonkwo because of the oracle of the god in his clan. The reason why he killed his adopted son was his fear of being thought as weak like his father. He regarded this prolicide as "show of manliness".

I may add the fact that the death of Ikemefuna and that of Unoka are in similar conditions. Unoka was not accepted in his community even when he died. Because he violated the

taboo to the earth goddess, he could not die in the house of village. He was carried to the Evil Forest, outside of the clan, and abandoned there to die. Unoka and Ikemefuna were both killed in the Evil Forest, because of god's commandment. Still more, Unoka took flute with him when he was brought to the forest, while, Ikemefuna was singing a song in his mind when he was killed. These common evidences can be interpreted as playing important parts in reeling up the multiple and manifold relationships around Okonkwo and twining them into a single thread of father-son story.

After Ikemefuna was killed, Nwoye, son of Okonkwo, deepened split with his father. Later, motivated by this experience, Nwoye converted to the new religion, Christianity, which had entered Igbo community as the missionary and had established a church in the Evil Forest.

... there was the young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. ... It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow.
(134)

It is noteworthy that the motive of his conversion is from his affection to poetry. He vanished from the community. Left by his first son, Okonkwo began to put his expectations on other children. His desire was realizing a patriarchal pedigree in his clan. But, if his son rejected to be a successor, the hereditary scheme he established would fall apart easily. He was always frightened by the anxiety for loss of manly ties.

To abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination. Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye's steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through

him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. (139)

The paragraph remarked above is implying that he thought the disruption of the bond of generations should have been caused by the invasion of feminine elements. The phrase "effeminate men clucking like old hen" signifies the followers of Christianity. Since there are no definite conditions identifying Christianity with femininity among the narrative, it can be defined that Okonkwo was sweeping the everything causing menaces to his hereditary scheme all-alike into the category of the feminine. And, he amplified his individual anxiety into the crisis of his community.

Even when Okonkwo instigated men in Umuofia to wage war against the order of white man, people hesitated to stand up. He found that manly days were only in the past. For him, Umuofia at the present time was no longer what it had been, because the people had already lost the bond of generations, patriarchal pedigree. Okonkwo had lost all the interests to the surrounding world. It may be appropriate to say that Okonkwo forced to be, in an ironical sense, an individual human.

In the meeting, court messengers, who were subordinates of white man, came and ordered the breakup of the meeting.

Finally, he killed the messenger by his matchet which had been used when he killed Ikemefuna. (184)

Okonkwo departed there leaving the people in tumult, and went into the Evil Forest, where he hanged himself to die. Because a suicide is an abomination to the earth goddess, he could not be buried like the other clansmen. It was just the same as his father, Unoka and his adopted son Ikemefuna.

Having observed a main straightforward plot of this novel,

and confirmed that it is constructed in accordance with the scheme of father-son relation, I can then go on to consider what problem it arouses. Obviously speaking, it displays a well-made single-track story about father-son pedigree; or it should be said, a too well-made story. So it could be guessed that there are some causes to accomplish whole matters into single line. There are some enhancers.

We can remember that Achebe has a desire to make his character be a real human, and he has an inclination to regard psychology as a reliable basis of humanism. So, it can be supposed that Achebe stretched this father-son relation to the scheme well-known as Oedipus complex. Oedipus plot as the psychological method is used to make Okonkwo be a real human. Consequently, it causes an adverse effect to emphasize a linear narrative making up a deep impression of the father-son relation as central theme.

To intensify it, other enhancers play assistant roles. A stubborn adherence to masculinity, and as the opposite, a strong repugnance to femininity, are inter-cooperative materials to weave up a single thread of father-son centered narrative. Okonkwo has three wives. But, the first wife has no proper name. She is only called "Nwoye's mother". (Though Achebe tried to confer the humanity on a nameless African body in modern novels, she is left nameless.) Or, he generally has no interest on his daughters except for Ezinma born in his second wife. But he always wishes that she should have been a boy.

Such enhancers highlight the father-son relation of Okonkwo and conceal the fact that there are much other relations; moreover excludes other miscellaneous relationships and forced them into the background out of reach of readers' interests.

In spite of such a privileged position Okonkwo's father-son pedigree got collapsed before it comes to the accomplishment.

His legitimate successor Nwoye converted to the Christianity and left his village. His adopted son Ikemefuna was killed by his hand. And, his favorite child Ezinma was a girl. From this, readers may generally be impressed that this novel is filled with the atmosphere of dismantlement of family ties (and the title of this book suggests it). But, it is noteworthy that this is only true in the condition that Okonkwo was in relation. When he is in no relation, some father-son schemes are maintained until the end. For example, looked in the scene of Nwoye's conversion while he "forsakes his father and his mother", he stepped into new father-son relation with God in the father's position. In Umuofia when people convened a trial, there appeared *egwugwu*, members of a secret society, and played role of judge. They were always called 'father'.

Thus, there are some father-son relations maintained until the end of novel. Then why do readers feel that people in Umuofia loose their bonds to other utterly? If the strong impression of Okonkwo's story makes all the other relations retreated in background, what is the cause of their subdued positions?

I think the cause is the structural homology between Okonkwo's hi-story (highlighted story) and other stories. Almost all the relation people constructs are based on the same kind of structure of upper-lower relation as the father-son relation that Okonkwo's story represents.

This novel gives an impression that it consists of the central highlighted story and peripheral background stories. Okonkwo is an isolated hero. It is not because the colonizer comes to his land and put a knife between his people (he killed Ikemefuna and made gap between his son before white man comes). He has rupture between his circumstances from the beginning, or at the time Achebe decided to utilize psychological method

and bestowed him the single linear hi-story (highlighted story) of father-son relation. Assimilating other relations such like father-son, mother-daughter, old-young or, put it simply, upper and lower relation into the single Father-Son hi-story of Okonkwo, this novel gave the impression of an individual history of Okonkwo.⁴ As a result, that deprives humanity of him and endows a stereotype image of archaic hero, in a history.

But if we leave from his story (history) and give a look to the relationships between women in this novel, we find there are plenty of folk tales and fables they tell for themselves. In this novel, men only use proverbs and sayings, while folk tales are told among women entirely, as if these oral stories were their subversive discourses undermining the Okonkwo's single hi-story oppressing their voices.

Okonkwo remembered his mother's folk stories, but he just thought they were "silly" and trivial talk. But, his son Nwoye loved the mother's stories rather than men's war stories. Also, Ikemefuna, when he brought to the Evil Forest to be killed there, remembered his mother's song.

If the effective messages could be sent from shadowy background confined in by the oppression of hi-story, it may be the echo of oral traditions.

Notes

1. This seems to be referred to Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952
2. It is not obvious what kind of readers Achebe thought to be his main readers, but inferring from his fundamental claim that a novelist must be a teacher of his society that he seems to be willing to be appreciated by common people rather than critics. Therefore the editorial target reader of this guide (for students) might match his hope.
3. Or, as Florence Stratton severely accused, both woman and child are so.

She had accused Achebe of taking them into same category in places. (Florence Stratton, "How Could Things Fall Apart for Whom They Were not Together?" *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 32)

4. On the contrary, relationships between equal positions are oppressed everywhere in this novel. The brotherhood between Nwoye and Ikemefuna is torn apart by their father. A friendly relationship between Ekwefi and Ezinma (mother and daughter) is reformed by the proxy mother that is performed by a female witch-doctor. The most symbolic example is the law of the clan that twin babies must be abandoned in the Evil Forest.

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