

# Divergent Paths: A Character Analysis of Unoka and Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Dr. Ekta Sharma (Assistant Professor in English) Pt. N.R.S. Govt. College, Rohtak

[ekta.sharma26@gmail.com](mailto:ekta.sharma26@gmail.com)

## Abstract

This paper delves into the thematic contrasts embodied by Unoka and Okonkwo—father and son—in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Both men possess unique, commendable traits: Unoka, renowned for his musical talents, and Okonkwo, distinguished by his indefatigable work ethic and valor. Okonkwo places supreme value on strength and accomplishment, whereas his father approaches life with a carefree, often self-indulgent attitude and neglects familial responsibilities. Okonkwo resents his father's passions and rejects all that Unoka loved. Yet, both men's lives end tragically, each absorbed into different existential spheres. Achebe masterfully crafts their personalities to awaken empathy in the reader, and the comparison between parent and child resonates as a universal dynamic. This essay closely examines Unoka and Okonkwo's defining characteristics, considering how their respective virtues and shortcomings lead to pitiful ends and reflect upon wider societal and cultural structures.

Keywords:- Unoka, Okonkwo, tragic fate, father-son conflict.

## INTRODUCTION

interrogate conditions in their social and cultural milieus. Achebe, born in the Igbo town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria, was shaped by both Christian and indigenous influences. Raised in a household where storytelling was emphasized, Achebe excelled academically, beginning his literary journey in university. His acclaimed novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) garnered worldwide attention, interrogating not only the incursion of British colonialism—

which fragmented Igbo society—but also the nuances of its traditions.

Achebe's art is multivalent: he presents both sides of cultural conflict with nuance, portraying the disruption colonialism wrought on indigenous customs, while honoring Igbo society's complexity. Central to *Things Fall Apart* are father-son relations, often explored through the stark contrast between Unoka—depicted as an irresponsible and indolent father—and his ambitious son Okonkwo, driven by industriousness and an aspiration for societal success. Despite similar physical features, their mental approaches diverge dramatically, creating a schism that cannot be bridged. The contrast between the two men is striking and underpins much of Achebe's narrative tension.

## Comparative Character Study

If Okonkwo is the embodiment of diligence and perseverance—laboring unceasingly as a farmer to fashion himself into an exemplar within Igbo society—Unoka is his antithesis. Although Unoka delighted many with his music, he was widely derided for his superficiality, incompetence, chronic indebtedness, and habitual evasion of financial obligations: “I shall pay, but not today” (TFA 7). His death from a disease rendered him an outcast, buried in the Evil Forest as tradition dictated for those afflicted by taboo illnesses. Okonkwo's aversion to his father was deep-rooted, intensified by Unoka's failures and the ridicule these

brought upon his family.

While Okonkwo's achievements—physical prowess, martial spirit, success in tribal contests—elevated his societal standing, they also produced pride and ruthlessness. His quest for distinction sometimes led to scornful or violent behavior, reproducing the disdain once shown to Unoka: "He called another man a 'woman,' implying cowardice"—ironically, the insult once hurled at his father. Okonkwo's drive stemmed from a desire to obliterate the shame attached to being Unoka's son.

Achebe's rendering of Unoka yields diverse interpretations. Read in one light, Unoka is an irresponsible patriarch—an 'ingenious, industrious debtor.' In another, he emerges as a celebrated artist whose music knit together his community. Ode Ogede notes, "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" (Ogede 99-100). Nevertheless, his family remained in perpetual want.

Okonkwo's relationship with Unoka exemplifies a psychological inheritance as much as a socioeconomic one. The "indescribable aversion" Okonkwo harbored stemmed from humiliation and deprivation in childhood, as well as society's contempt for Unoka—a "do-nothing man." Unoka left his son nothing but hardship; Okonkwo had to rely on "inflexible will, confidence, sheer courage and very hard work" to secure his own legacy.

Unoka's philosophy favored present pleasure over future prosperity. His "addiction to drinking palm-wine and singing, feasting and dancing" was notorious. Achebe remarks humorously, "If any money came his way and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine and made merry" (TFA 4). Despite his debts, he could artfully persuade creditors to wait: "I shall pay, but not today" (TFA 7), citing Igbo proverbs to justify his priorities: "...the sun will shine on those who stand,

before it shines on those who kneel under them" (TFA 7).

Unlike Unoka, Okonkwo met his downfall through internal and external forces. Achebe's narrative expresses sympathy for both men, suggesting that Unoka's fate resulted from "bad chi and evil fortune." His ignominious death—alone in the Evil Forest—was precipitated by apathy and a lack of ambition.

Okonkwo's contempt for his father's deficiency fueled his relentless ambition and self-denial: "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). Forced to support two families with meager resources, Okonkwo was haunted by the memory of his "weak, idle, poor, contemptible father." The need to transcend this legacy propelled Okonkwo to extremes, cultivating success and suppressing every trait reminiscent of Unoka.

Achebe accentuates their divergence further. Where Unoka "hated all blood spilling strife," Okonkwo reveled in his capacity for violence and was celebrated for victories in tribal warfare. This contrast underscores Okonkwo's alignment with clan values and Unoka's perceived deficiency: "Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was, in fact, a coward and could not bear the sight of blood..."

Yet Unoka was authentically Igbo in his love of music, celebration, and communal gatherings. Occasionally, he manifested care: during a poor harvest, his words comforted Okonkwo, telling his son he had "a manly and a proud heart." Ode Ogede emphasizes Unoka's role in highlighting "the tranquillity of tribal life, of the motif of primordial innocence..." (Ogede 56).

## Conclusion

Unoka and Okonkwo differ profoundly in character, values, and conduct. Achebe's nuanced portrayal of the father-son relationship, complete with flaws and admirable qualities, is remarkable. Though both uphold certain Igbo traditions, neither achieves a fulfilling end: Unoka succumbs in isolation due to illness, while Okonkwo, in defiance of colonial encroachment and societal change, dies by his own hand, also alienated from his community. In the face of their virtues and vices, both father and son meet tragic fates that engender reader sympathy. Achebe offers a potent exploration of the generational divide, the burdens of legacy, and the inexorable forces of change.

## Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 2003. Print.

Ogede, Ode. *Achebe's Things Fall Apart: a Reader's Guide*. London: Continuum Books, 2008.