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Life & Times of Okonkwo:

A reexamination of *Things Fall Apart*

Recent developments of the twentieth century have served as a catalyst for the birth of a new genre of literature that carries with it a widely believed ground-breaking and innovative means of global communication. The face associated with this literary revolution, Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian born novelist, has published several works, most notably his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which first fell under the spotlight of the international stage in late nineteen fifties. Since the debut of Achebe's acclaimed novel, there have been numerous works to begin circulating that critics have discerned as African Literature. In the year 1983, J.M. Coetzee published his novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, sparking the debate over the nature of the genre that Achebe ignited, its ability to depict an all encompassing representation of the people for whom it is named, and whether such an entity of literature can indeed exist. Through the narration of the tale of Michael K, a wandering nomad whose origin of African descent offers no distinct inimitability, Coetzee's novel challenges the possibility of capturing a nation through the story of an individual and suggests the reexamination of Achebe's work through an entirely new lens.

Things Fall Apart opens with a description of the story's protagonist, Okonkwo. Beginning with the first sentence, the narrator states, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (Achebe, 3). The narrator from the very start is laying the groundwork for a portrayal of Okonkwo, the successful African man who is meant to serve as a

glowing emblem of the Ibo people he represents. The fact that the novel specifically enumerates that Okonkwo is recognized not only in his own tribal community, but even beyond, is suggestive of the manner in which *others* perceive Okonkwo as a representative for his tribe and as a national allegory for his people.

The method in which the novel positions Okonkwo as the “archetype” Ibo tribesman is further explicated through examination of the tribe’s relationship with other villages. As pointed out by the narrator, in response to the murder of a tribesman’s wife by a man who did not dwell amongst the villagers, the Ibo people provided the particular community of whom the murderer was affiliated with an ultimatum; they threatened to wage war if not given a “young man and a virgin to atone for the murder” (Achebe, 27). As for the task of communicating the Ibo’s forewarning threat of imminent warfare, Okonkwo is selected. As stated, “Okonkwo had been chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies” (Achebe, 27). Okonkwo is situated here as being a representation and symbol of the people for whom he speaks, the Ibo. Embodying all that is characteristic of the powerful and prevailing tribesman, Okonkwo is elected as the delegate for the task of representing his people and instilling fear in the opposing nation.

The chain of events that transpire in the village of Umuofia during the lack of Okonkwo’s presence further illuminates the fact that *Things Fall Apart* is indeed arranged around Okonkwo being the model for what it means to be an Ibo. Close examination of the text yields the discovery that the point in time in the novel during which Okonkwo is in exile, part two, corresponds precisely with the intrusion of the European missionaries into the Ibo tribe. In Okonkwo’s second year of exile, Obierika, Okonkwo’s close companion from his home town of Umuofia, pays Okonkwo a visit during which he relays to him the latest developments in their

home village. Obierika speaks of the Europeans missionaries' incursion and then concludes his debriefing Okonkwo of the situation in Umuofia by stating, "I am greatly afraid" (Achebe, 140). It is just two years later that Obierika returns yet again to Mbanta with news of a progressively worse situation in their homeland. The narrator states that at the time of Obierika's visit the missionaries had, "won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding villages" (Achebe, 141). The Ibo world appears to be crumbling as they know it without Okonkwo's presence. It is in Okonkwo's absence that "things fall apart". The implications of this finding are wide and many. However, none is more provocative than the notion that the beginning of the collapse of the Ibo society and the nonappearance of their archetypal and influential tribesman are directly correlated. Without Okonkwo, an individual with tremendously strong and deeply rooted Ibo values, the tribe lacks the resilience and fortitude to protect their way of life and fight off the European missionaries along with the alien precepts they impose upon them. It is not until Okonkwo's return, after his seven year expulsion, that the reader for the first time witnesses the Ibo people taking a strong stand in opposition of the missionaries.

The rebellion that the Ibo people launch against the Europeans takes shape in the form of a violent campaign in defense of their long-established ideals. The first attack is most notably marked by the destruction of the European built church. The narrator attributes this assault to being in direct fulfillment of Okonkwo having "spoken violently to his clansmen" (Achebe, 192) and them having "listened to him with respect" (Achebe, 192). Unfortunately for the Ibo, the initial success they enjoy quickly fades, paving the way for the eventual devastating collapse of their society. The event that triggers this collapse, as expected, has Okonkwo at the very center. In response to the missionary messenger's order for the Ibo people to disperse from their meeting

in the marketplace, the narrator writes, “In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete” (Achebe, 204). Enthralled with anger, Okonkwo “in a flash” seals his fate *and* subsequently the Ibo’s fate along with him. His rash course of action leaves him no other choice than to take his own life before the Europeans have the chance to do so themselves. Directly following his suicide, the Ibo people are revealed being escorted to the court by the missionaries. Identified as epitomizing the Ibo tribesman, Okonkwo’s defiance is understood and interpreted by the European missionaries as a sign of Ibo insubordination as a whole. The Ibo ultimately pay the price for the actions of their iconic emissary.

Coetzee’s novel opens with a description of the first thing that was noticed about Michael K upon his birth, “that he had a hare lip” (Coetzee, 3). The audacious depiction of Michael K’s miniscule birth defect is to serve as a foreshadowing of the barrier between Michael K and society throughout the ensuing story. From the outset Michael K is already different. He is atypical. In fact, Michael K is found to be such an unusual ‘creature’ that the narrator goes on to explain that, because others would laugh at him, his mother “kept it [Michael K] away from other children” (Coetzee, 3). The narrator here further explains how his unfortunate abnormality translated to effects in the real world. Coetzee commences his novel with this unusual illustration to prepare the reader to embark on a journey with a character who is meant to be anything but typical of his society. *Dissimilar* to Okonkwo, the archetypical Ibo tribesman, Michael K is positioned to be viewed as an individual who represents no one but himself.

As Coetzee’s novel advances, Michael K, who enjoys a lengthy time period of solitude, is abruptly stripped of the freedom he so dearly cherishes. While roaming in isolation among the mountains, Michael K is abducted by a police force and brought in against his will to the Jakkalsdrif work camp. The narrator relates Michael K’s reaction to the sudden and unpleasant

change of environment in noting that he thought, “I needed more warning, I should have been told I was going to be sent back amongst people” (Coetzee, 74). Michael K’s discomfort here is linked to his nostalgic wanting of the time that he treasured while spent secluded from others. Coetzee’s rendering of Michael K, a character that has no allegiance to a particular people, lives in isolation from civilization, and even has an extreme disdain for forcibly being brought into a community of others, is, once again, in complete antagonism of the archetypal Ibo tribesman that Achebe illustrates.

In the latter portion of Coetzee’s tale, the reader witnesses the recapture of Michael K and his incarceration into a prison hospital ward. The interactions between the doctors and ‘Michaels’, as he is referred to by them, offers further insight into Michael K’s acute disparagement from society. Met with frequent requests by the doctors pressuring him to tell his story and eat the food they give him, Michael K continually refuses to pay heed to their appeals. In one instance, the first person narrator of part two of Coetzee’s work is found saying to ‘Michaels’, “Give yourself some substance man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed” (Coetzee, 140). This is but one of many instances in which the narrator is pestering Michael K to eat the food that the doctors are providing him with. As demonstrated by this particular encounter, the doctors assume that Michael K’s disobedience and inconformity is an act of suicidal defiance. The doctors interpret his behavior to mean that he must merely want to be “a digit in the units column at the end of the war” (Coetzee, 140). The reader, however, is familiar with the fuller scope of Michael K’s existence and knows that his insolence and refusal to eat the food that the doctors provide him with is not an act of suicide, but rather is characteristic of his contempt and discomfort with partaking in social activities. Michael K’s rejection of the outstretched arm that is extended to him by the doctors exemplifies his self

sustaining nature and insistence upon forging minimal relationships and connections with other people. Michael K, once more, is painted by Coetzee as being an individual who visibly deviates from the social norm and could not possibly be attributed the traits that would allow for viewing him as an archetype or representation of any other people.

The psychological theory of “drive reduction” states that humans have an innate, pre-wired, aspiration to reach a state of cognitive homeostasis. This drive manifests itself in many ways, most notably in the manner in which people have a tendency to create stereotypes about others; in order to reach a point of comfort, where one feels as though the other is no longer a complete mystery, one is habitually found constructing a means of categorizing another. Achebe’s novel is a prime example of this hypothesis taking shape in literature. In presenting a narrative that positions a single character, Okonkwo, as the archetypal and emblematic symbol for an entire populace, Achebe allows for the opportunity of an examination and assessment of the consequences that this structure and outlook give way to. Coetzee’s tale, centered around Michael K, a character that is distinctly unique and comparable to no one, reminds readers that no individual can be understood as representative of an entire people. Fusing the two narratives together, it becomes clear that Coetzee’s work is engaging in an explicit dialogue with Achebe’s novel that is saturated with implications. It is only by understanding Coetzee’s protagonist, Michael K, that a reexamination of *Things Fall Apart* allows for the elucidation of the danger involved in viewing an individual as an archetype. Coetzee, in presenting an individual that is positioned on the opposite side of the spectrum of Achebe’s central character, demonstrates through his novel the individuality and distinctiveness of each and every one of humankind’s constituents. Exploring Okonkwo and the Ibo people through this new lens yields the occasion for perceiving the essence of the tragic flaw that gives way to the Ibo downfall. The Ibo

ultimately suffer as a result of the blood stained hands of their “archetype”, Okonkwo. The European missionaries mistakenly presume that Okonkwo’s actions speak for his tribe as a whole. It is precisely herein that the message which Coetzee reveals rises to the surface: The centering of Achebe’s novel around an archetypical figure is not a means of claiming that the categorizing of all African people is a possibility, but rather allows for illumination of the perils and ramifications of such an abhorrently unprecedented generalization.

Works Cited

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Nigeria: William Heinemann Ltd, 1958. Print.

Coetzee, J.M. *Life & Times of Michael K*. South Africa: Ravan Press. 1983. Print.