

A Review of Crime and Punishment in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

Late Chinua Achebe was a celebrated and an outstanding novelist in Africa and the rest of the world. He was born on 16th of November 1930 in Ogidi, few miles to the north – east of Onitsha in Anambra State of Nigeria. He attended Government College, Umuahia and later attended University College, Ibadan where he read English, History and Religious Studies. He graduated with B. A degree in 1953. *Chinua* Achebe wrote his first novel, “Things Fall apart” in 1958 as a young writer at the tender age of twenty – eight. This was followed by “No Longer at Ease” in 1960, “Arrow of God” in 1964 and “Chike and the River” which he wrote concurrently with “Arrow of God” in 1964. In 1966, he wrote “A Man of the People”. *The* first two novels – “Things Fall Apart” and “No Longer at Ease” have been translated into many foreign Languages i. e. German, Italian, Spanish, Slovene, Russian, Hebrew, French, Czech and Hungarian. *Things* Fall Apart was selected from the list of Chinua Achebe’s novels because it serves the purpose of the reviewers more than any of his literary works, and because the book had also, not been reviewed in the areas selected. In the novel were recorded the series of crimes committed by the major and minor characters, and the punishments awarded against such crimes as reflected in the novel.

Keywords

Crime, Punishment, Okonkwo, Things Fall Apart, Novel

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1 .Crime in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

In chapter four (part one) of the novel, we saw an incident of violence against women in the novel. Okonkwo who was the principal and major character in the novel committed wife battery. He was provoked into a justifiable anger when his youngest wife did not return early enough to cook the afternoon meal for him. The wife went to plait her hair at her friend’s house, forgetting that it was her turn to cook for their husband. The incident led to Okonkwo breaking the sacrilegious law of week of peace, which of course, is discussed later in this work.

In chapter five (part one) of the novel, Okonkwo also committed another crime of wife battery against his second

wife. The said wife had cut off a few leaves from a young tender banana tree to wrap some food; the action really offended Okonkwo. The incidence led Okonkwo to another crime of attempted murder which shall be discussed later in this review paper.

Finally, in chapter ten (part one) of the novel, another violence against women was also recorded. Uzowulu had been found in the habit of beating his wife Mgbafo all the time, with a single occasion of such beating leading to child miscarriage.

For Okonwo, his family environment – related factors (largeness and structure) possibly warranted his violent act

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against his women. Kang (2012) argued that those who live in a small family may have a lower level of interaction with family members and a much lower risk of physical abuse compared to those living in a larger family unit. Likewise, the social organization or functionality of a family, which is assumed from its structure and relationships among its members, is likely to be related to the onset of violence. Okonkwo had a large family and the structure of that family usually led to Okonkwo occasional demonstration of bitterness against his family members, especially his wives.

The effects of violence against women were also reflected in Achebe's work *Uzowulu* violent act against his wife Mgbafo showed that the woman suffered injuries and emotional or psychological effect from her husband history of violence. Hayes (2012) argued that women suffer greater injuries from their partner's use of violence, and likely to suffer emotional and / or psychological effects. Mgbafo suffered physical injury and emotional problem as a result of the act of constant beating from her husband as narrated by her brothers when the case was heard by the nine masked spirits who administered justice in Umofia. Example of such injury she suffered was the miscarriage she had during one of the numerous acts of violence. Abadi et al (2012) argued that Domestic violence during pregnancy is a global social problem due to its potential ability to physically and psychologically harm a woman and her foetus. These were exactly what happened to Mgbafo and her unborn baby.

In chapter seventeen (part two) of the novel, a case of crime of child abuse featured. Okonkwo greatly abused his son Nwoye by choking him and beating him with a big stick for joining a group of Christians. The occasion of the abuse was saved by Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle. We argued that Okonkwo's childhood was marked with abuse in area of neglect by his father, Nnoka who was a lazy and failed man that could not take care of his family members. Okonkwo's childhood experience contributed to his harshness against his son. Fontaine and Nolin (2011), Herrenkohl and Herrenkohl (2007) and Dankoski et.al (2006) argued that a childhood marked by abuse or neglect on the part of a parent could result in personality disorders and that these disorders may have something to do with the intergenerational transmission of abuse. This was exactly what happened in the life of Okonkwo. There was a connection between his experience as abused child and his violent relationship as an adult, as explained by Whiting et al (2009).

Attempted murder was recorded in chapter five (part one) of the novel. Okonkwo made an attempt to murder his second wife by gun shot, when the woman, having been beaten by Okonkwo, humiliated Okonkwo and his gun that never shot. The scene clearly demonstrated that Okonkwo had an impaired capacity to inhibit his impulsive violent aggression.

Hanion et al (2012) were of the opinion that schizophrenic persons significantly demonstrated neuropsychological impairment. Specific neuro-psychological deficits may increase the likelihood of some schizophrenic men to murder family members due to an impaired capacity to inhibit impulsive violent aggression. A thorough examination of Okonkwo's personality and character would clearly show him to be schizophrenic.

Murder Cases also featured prominently in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In chapter seven (part one) of the novel, Ikemefuna was murdered by Okonkwo for the crime he did not commit but which his father was part to. In chapter fifteen (part two), the people of Abame murdered a white man; in chapter eighteen, a man was also hanged for killing a missionary; in chapter twenty, Aneto killed his clan man Oduche in a fight over the possession of land, and finally in chapter twenty – four (part three) of the novel, Okonkwo killed a head messenger of the white man who came to disperse the meeting called by the elders of Umofia to discuss the way forward on how to handle the white man and his religion. Very similar to murder is manslaughter. Manslaughter is an act of killing other person unknowingly or without any premeditated plan. In chapter thirteen (part one) of the novel, Okonkwo committed manslaughter. His gun had exploded and bullet from his exploded gun killed a sixteen – year – old son of the dead man whom they were paying homage to in traditional burial dance and gun shooting. Okonkwo committed Ochu (female killing) because it was been inadvertent.

In chapter twenty – two (part three), a case of malicious damage was recorded in the novel. The church building was demolished by "egwugwu" and the elders of Umofia because a Christian had brought untold abomination by unmasking an egwugwu in public, at the gaze of women, children and uninitiated ones. There were sacrilegious crimes committed against the gods and the spirits in the novel. Enoch in chapter twenty –two (part three) had fallen on egwugwu and tore off his mask. Enoch had killed an ancestral spirit, and because of this, Umuofia was thrown into confusion. In chapter four (part one) another sacrilegious crime was committed by Okonkwo when he broke the law of week of peace for beating his wife. It was a week ordained before the planting season when nobody must say harsh word or fight. It was a sacred week. Okonkwo profaned this week by beating his youngest wife.

Finally, we have two recorded cases of suicide in the novel. In chapter three (part one) of the novel, a man committed suicide by using his cloth to hang himself because of the miserable yam harvest recorded in that tragic year. It was a year of sad harvest, like a funeral. A sociological examination of this suicide reflected anomic suicide. It was an anomic

suicide because the person in question felt “lost” because he was confused as a result of severe disruption of society equilibrium (value of good harvests) which created a social void and left him uncertain about which way to turn (Clinard and Meier, 1998). The second suicide case appeared in chapter twenty-five (part three), where Okonkwo killed himself by hanging. A critical examination of the type of suicide committed by Okonkwo showed altruistic suicide because it involved suicide done in respect of group values because he held his clan very high but unfortunately was disappointed by the same clan he held in high esteem. The suicide was also egoistic in nature. It was egoistic because Okonkwo lacked identification with others or rather others lacked identification with his action. It was a serious conflict between individual orientation and group orientation. Okonkwo wanted war against white man and his religion but Umofia, his clan would not go to war.

2. Punishment in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

Punishment also featured prominently in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. In chapter four (part one) of the novel, Okonkwo was punished for breaking the sacred week of peace. (Nso – Ani). He was ordered by the Chief priest of Ani (Ezeani) to pay fines of one she – goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. He paid for everything and brought them to the shrine of Ani. He also added a pot of palm – wine to if freely from his own will. In chapter ten (part one), Uzowulu was ordered by the masked spirits to go to his in – laws with a pot of wine as a fine and beg his wife to return to him. Giving this pot of wine amounted to a form of punishment.

In chapter thirteen (part one) of the novel, Okonkwo ran into exile for seven years, for killing a clan’s man inadvertently. His houses were demolished, his animals and his barn destroyed as punishments for this crime. These punishments were necessary to cleanse the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman. The men (including Obierika, Okonkwo’s friend) had nothing against Okonkwo as a person, but were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted. They were just carrying out the will of the goddess and if the clan did not exact punishment for an offence against the great goddess, her wrath would be loosed on all the land and not just on the offender.

In chapter fourteen (part two) of the novel, a whole clan (Abame) was wiped out for killing a white man (a reflection of genocide in modern day justice system) and in chapter eighteen (part two) an unnamed man was hanged for killing a white missionary and also in chapter twenty (part three) of the novel, Aneto was hanged at Umuru for killing Oduche (his clan’s man) in fight over a possession of land.

Finally, the entire Umofia was asked to pay 200 bags of cowries as a fine for malicious destruction of a church building. This was a form of punishment for their action when a church building was destroyed in an effort to pacify the angered spirits of the land, when Enoch unmasked an egwugwu before children and women.

3. Conclusion

Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is one of the most popular of literary works from African writers. The book had not been previously reviewed in areas of crime and punishment. This is the gap filled in this review. Various forms of crime committed in the novel have been examined and the forms of punishment in the novel expository explained. We recommend reviews of other Chinua Achebe’s works and other related works from other African novelists.

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