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Okonkwo's Loss of Identity: Honour, Male Power, and Sense of Duty in *Things Fall Apart*

Mamadou BA *

As it is revealed by the background of *Things Fall Apart*¹, the Igbo society is characterised by order and hierarchy. Both concepts are so deeply rooted that their alteration forcibly engenders chaos in society. This is reminiscent of the English people's belief in the chain of being during the Elizabethan period².

As a matter of fact, in the Igbo society too, the arrival of the Europeans may be regarded as the starting point of the chaos resulting from their interference with Igbo traditions. The first alteration of those traditional cultures concerned mainly the established power attributed to men by a patriarchal society. That waning of male power inevitably affected various aspects of order and hierarchy, particularly honour and the sense of duty which were the attributes of men. Moreover, those attributes constitute the main criteria for respect.

Male power appears thus as fundamental in the Igbo patriarchal society where "power is usually cited as the most important factor used by men to construct their own identities as the 'engendered representatives of humanity.'" ³ That power is

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¹ Chinua Achebe. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. [the title will be abbreviated *TFA* for further references]

² The Elizabethan society believed in a well ordered chain of being at the top of which there was God, then the king who was His representative on Earth, and finally the head of the family. The key conception was that a break in the chain would cause troubles at lower levels. Similarly, disturbances on Earth were also synonymous with disturbances in the Heavens.

³ Ada Uzoamaka Azodo. "Masculinity, Power and Language in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" in *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol. I: Omenka the Master Artist*. Edited by Ernest N. Emenyonu (Trenton-Asmara: Africa World Press, 2004, pp.49-66), p. 49. [the title will be abbreviated *EP* for further references]

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not only at the physical level, but also at that of society itself. At the physical one, individuals who appear to be lazy are looked upon as *agbala*, meaning a woman in the Igbo language. Okonkwo's father and elder son illustrate this idea. He himself became famous after defeating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling competition. This is what Azodo labels as an "ability physical power"⁴; he puts parallel to the "coercive physical power" exercised by the British colonisers upon Umuofia people, and which Okonkwo uses to punish his wives (*EP*, p.52).

At the level of society, there is what Azodo calls a "structural power" and which consists of a certain number of privileges given to the individual by the clan. This is illustrated through the character Ogbuefi Ezeudu who "had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded a great respect in all the clan." (*TFA*, p.57). The "positive male power" – the term is used in opposition to the "coercive physical power" which is in a certain way demeaning – responds to the standards established by the elders of the clan as a fundamental basis of order and hierarchy in Umuofia society. There is a dialectical link between male power and honour. In effect, this "structural power" is accorded on the basis of the individual's wisdom, and in relation to some ideals defined by the clan. Honour becomes thus the axis round which all other aspects of order and hierarchy turn. The centrality of honour in the organised Umuofia system is reinforced by the fact that it is the attribute of people who are likely to accede to the leadership of the clan. Consequently, those people show a strong sense of duty because they have to stick to – and to promote – those values that ensure order and hierarchy in the clan. The man who fails to achieve power loses his identity as a real member of the clan.

Our concern, therefore, is to show how male power, honour, and the sense of duty have led to the decline of Okonkwo's identity.

Set in Igboland towards the end of the nineteenth century, *Things Fall Apart* is characterised by an imbrications of many themes among which one can mention male power, honour, sense of duty, exile, clash of cultures, order and hierarchy. The novel illustrates the chaos and the conflicting situation caused by the arrival of the

⁴ Ibidem, p.52.

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Europeans who brought with them a new religion, a new way of life, and new ways of thinking. The first part of the novel shows the well structured society of Umuofia, with its 'political'⁵ organisation and kinship system. One also witnesses the first illustration of male power through the main character, Okonkwo who is depicted as courageous warrior whose fame is beyond doubt:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on *solid* personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. (TFA, p.3)

Okonkwo's fame is emphasised by the narrator who puts it parallel to a physical description that reveals much about his personality:

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. *He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often.* He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough; he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. (TFA, pp.3-4) [My emphasis]

One may assert that Okonkwo has achieved self-fulfilment as far as his power as a man is concerned. According to Ada Uzoamaka Azado: "In the Umuofia community of *Things Fall Apart*, Igbo men are constrained to achieve and flaunt [male superiority], in order to be seen and respected." (EP, p.50) The Nigerian society Achebe describes in *Things Fall Apart* is characterised by patriarchy which manifests itself at all levels. Despite the concept of *Nneka*, meaning "Mother is Supreme," which is reminiscent of Steady's assertion that "the most important factor with regard to

⁵ We put the term between inverted commas because it is not in the actual sense of the term.

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the woman in traditional society is her role as mother”⁶, women are always marginalised and looked upon as mere properties of men: “In domestic terms, women are quantified as part of men’s acquisitions. As wives, women come in multiple numbers, sandwiched between yam barns and titles.”⁷ Therefore, women appear in Umuofia society as part of the many criteria referred to for manliness. Their isolation is stated by the narrator: “It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men.” (*TFA*, p.87). But this is not inherent to Umuofia only. In fact, in African societies where phallocracy is dominant, women are usually placed in a secondary position.

It is not then surprising if the author opposes him to his father who is depicted as a lazy and irresponsible drunkard:

Unoka, for that was his father’s name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was a lazy and *improvident* and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbors and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man’s mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one’s lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts. (*TFA*, p.4)

Unoka’s lack of responsibility appears through his inability to manage properly the money he earns. His only concern is to get gourds of palm-wine and to celebrate with his friends. He is depicted as a failed man, as an *agbala*. The fact that people mock at him is also illustrative of that failure the narrator reinforces in the following lines:

Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. /.../ Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the

⁶ Filomina Chioma Steady. *The Blackwoman Crossculturally*. Cambridge-Massachusetts: Schenkman, 1981, p.29.

⁷ Rose Ure Mezu. “Women in Achebe’s World”. <http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.html> (le 12 janvier 2005).

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sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. (*TFA*, pp.5-6)

This negative picture drawn of Unoka is not fortuitous. It is a device used by the narrator to epitomise male power in the Igbo society as well as the conception people have of men who fail to achieve it. Thus, one realizes that men's power is closely connected with their own quest for identity. This explains the reason why Okonkwo is in a perpetual attempt to strengthen his power which sometimes is threatened in many regards. In other words, he tries to define himself by forging an image which, in his patriarchal society, is that of the real man with all the power attributed to him. His identitarian essence and social status constitute the main preoccupations Okonkwo grapples with in an internal conflict.

Okonkwo appears, first, as a successful man who has achieved the self-fulfilment he tries to look for. As Ifeoma Onyemelukwe puts it:

[Okonkwo] is the man who was able to resolve his identity crisis in late adolescence. At age 18 he had developed self-confidence, a high self-concept, self-esteem and had high achievement motivation as typical of the average Igbo man. The consequence of this is his reverberating achievement and celebrity.⁸ (*EP*, p.37)

Okonkwo's physical strength is combined with his maturity to forge a powerful personality in such a patriarchal society. Onyemelukwe adds:

It *should* be noted that the Okonkwo being x-rayed in this passage has grown. He is about thirty-eight years old; and grows even the more in the novel. He is now a mature adult member of a male hegemonious society which upholds cultural practices that predispose the woman to subjugation and oppression and stifle her development and progress in society somewhat like Alkali's mimetic world in *The Stillborn and the Virtuous Woman*. He is married to three wives and has many children; polygamy and large unit being also indices of greatness in this culture. (*EP*, p.37)

⁸ Ifeoma Onyemelukwe. "Sear for Lost Identity in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" in *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol. 1: Omenka the Master Artist*. op. cit., pp. 35-47.

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That status of the male character as a powerful individual is thus reinforced by the image of the *agbala* which is generally used to allude to unsuccessful or coward men. Onyemelukwe remarks:

Things Fall Apart depicts very successful Okonkwo as showing no empathy or sympathy to less fortunate men like his father, Unoka. Such individuals, to his mind, are simply *agbala* (Igbo word for woman) or she-men. It is not surprising that Okonkwo stands out in the novel as a macho man with a great deal of self-esteem and self-confidence. The cap fits Okonkwo in many instances in the given description. True, *TFA* portrays him as one who is neither patient nor tolerant. (*EP*, pp. 37-38)

According to the Igbo cosmogony, Okonkwo's power stems from his own will to achieve success. This is clearly expressed in the novel:

But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands. That was why Okonkwo had been chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agreed to give up a young woman and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife.⁹ (*TFA*, p.27)

Achebe uses an omniscient narrator to extend the limits of Okonkwo's power, recapturing thereby what has been lost through Okonkwo's father, i.e. success and honour. Okonkwo failed to make an effective use of his power. He is victim of 'over-power'. The purpose of his failure may be to show the weakness of the lonely hero blinded by the honour of patriarchy.

Okonkwo's fame sinks overnight after the accidental murder he is guilty of. He is no longer the image of power and fame he used to be because his gun exploded and killed inadvertently a young boy. Moreover, the rules established in the Igbo traditional society stipulate that any person guilty of such a crime should be exiled to his motherland. This, combined with Okonkwo's masochism, emphasizes the shame shed on him. As a matter of fact, he falls into a vertiginous decline synonymous with nothingness:

⁹ Francis Ibe Mogu. "Beyond the Igbo Cosmos: Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a Cross-Cultural Novel" in *Emerging Perspectives on Chinua Achebe Vol. I: Omenka the Master Artist*. op. cit., pp. 25-34.

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Overnight, great Okonkwo, the great warrior, the great warrior, the great wrestler, one of the most outstanding achievers of his time, most *respected* and revered, loses all he has laboured to achieve just in the twinkle of an eye. His hope or remaining "one of the lords of the clan," is shattered.

His *flight* to Mbanta implies starting life afresh, from the scratch. It means loss of self-esteem, peace, happiness. His ego is obviously punctured. His fame transforms into shame. His identity crumbles. Crises and conflict set in again. (*EP*, pp.41-42)

It is obvious that the situation into which Okonkwo is put appears to be paradoxical because, despite the patriarchal trend, he is exiled to his mother's village. This can be regarded as a device Achebe uses to reshape the image of the African woman whose lost identity is being recaptured by giving her a very important role, i.e. that of a shelter (or a relief) for man. In this regard the novelist wants to celebrate the 'Mother as a Supreme Being', a concept which is recurrent in his writings.

To a large extent, Okonkwo's return to the land of the mother has played an important role in his final situation in the sense that it made him safe from the influences of Europeans. He became fully aware of his 'depersonalisation' when he was in exile. This identitarian change is noticed by his uncle who aptly remarks:

Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are *only* his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or "Mother is Supreme?" We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. (*TFA*, p.133)

The narrator epitomises Okonkwo's awareness of the loss of identity he suffers from: "[He] knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan." (*TFA*, p.171) However, his return is prefigured in the following lines that put an emphasis on his honour and sense of duty:

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He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. /.../ Even in his first year in exile he had begun to plan his return. (*TFA*, pp.171)

At the same time, there is a sort of a prophecy showing the devastating situation that would be the outcome of the return of Okonkwo who has decided to recapture his lost identity.

One might wonder if the changes that have occurred in his society would allow him to achieve his reintegration without troubles. When taking into account the Okonkwo portrayed at the beginning of the novel as a famous strong wrestler and farmer on the one hand, one may believe that his return would bring again order and hierarchy in Umuofia. But on the other hand the imbrications of concepts like honour, male power, and sense of duty are such that they constitute in common an 'epicentre' or 'turbulence zone' characterised by violence and by the decline of Okonkwo's fame and personality (see chart n°1 in the appendix).

The 'epicentre' or 'turbulence zone' (**E**) is surrounded by three 'peripheral zones' which form the common areas between the three concepts organised in pairs: male power/honour (**P1**), male power/sense of duty (**P2**), and sense of duty/honour (**P3**). In the first 'peripheral zone' (**P1**), Okonkwo is shown as a famous character, but also as a man who beats his wife on grounds of honour. In the second 'peripheral zone' (**P2**), one sees Okonkwo who is very successful as a good farmer aware of his role. On the other hand, failure is shown through Okonkwo's father who is portrayed as a lazy and irresponsible man. The third 'peripheral zone' (**P3**) illustrates the presence of a justice established in the Umuofia society. It is in order to conform to that justice that Okonkwo is exiled for having committed a murder inadvertently.

Coming back to Okonkwo's reintegration in his society, placing him in the framework of the figure mentioned above shows that his final situation is not fortuitous. In effect, Okonkwo constitutes a combination of male power, honour, and sense of duty. His bad-temperedness and his eagerness to be successful illustrate this 'centrality', reminding us of a volcanic epicentre where magma is hotter and damages are more important. Therefore, the violent situation that has hastened Okonkwo into an unavoidable decline is engendered by the non-linear overlapping of male power, honour, and sense of duty.

However, should we have a linear (or horizontal) ordering of male power, honour, and sense of duty, it would be impossible to find an 'epicentre'. Rather, we would have only two

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'peripheral zones' (P1 and P2) from which decline is excluded. This is valid for the three possible situations (S1, S2, S3) we would have when permuting the three elements, i.e. male power, honour and sense of duty as shown on the charts n°2.

We notice that the absence of one 'peripheral zone' entails the disappearance of the 'epicentre' because the different elements are connected only in pairs. This means that in the first case represented by chart n°1, Okonkwo focuses on one of the concepts. Considering all situations, we find out that Okonkwo insists mainly on his honour he tries to keep by imposing male power. That is why in the third situation (S3) where there is no direct link between male power and honour, there is neither violence nor fame. Rather, the interference with the sense of duty engenders either exile and justice, or success and failure. Okonkwo's purpose is mostly to avoid being the failure his father was. He is obsessed by the eagerness to recapture his identity. Onyemelukwe writes:

The narrator tells us that "even as a little boy" Okonkwo "had resented his father's failure and weakness" and had suffered from people *making* a mockery of his father, who owes shamelessly and dies without taking even a title. In Igbo culture a man without title is regarded as a woman and treated so. One can imagine Okonkwo's inferiority complex as a child and the shame he had had to put up with. Cognizant of the fact that unlike most of his peers he inherited nothing from his "loafer" of a father he realizes that he has got to work extra hard to make it in life. And he desires to be a success not a failure like his father. Okonkwo ends up being the popular opposite of his father, Unoka. The choice is his. He rejects the father's image and settles for who he wants to be: The exact opposite of Unoka. He becomes intrinsically motivated, his resentment for his *agbala* of a father being the propelling force. (*EP*, p.39)

For Onyemelukwe, Okonkwo's search for identity turns into a 'psychological phobia' which compels him to reject any characteristic one could find in his father:

/.../ This psychological phobia leads him to hate everything that his father, Unoka had *loved*, such as gentleness and idleness. If Okonkwo treats his wives and children tyrannically like Medza's father in Beti's *Mission Terminée*, it is linked to this psychological phobia. The same explanation goes for his inclination of

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wife-battery and other excesses of his in the novel, like killing Ikemefuna who called him “father” or firing a shot at Ekwefi, his beloved second wife. (*EP*, p.39)

Male power constitutes the main aspect on which Okonkwo bases his quest for identity, his quest for manliness. This is what entails violence and decline at the ‘epicentre’. Would it be the same if Okonkwo were a woman in the patriarchal Umuofia society? The answer to this question is not obvious in *Things Fall Apart*, but rather, in *A Man of the People*¹⁰.

When we apply the diagrams to *A Man of the People*, replacing ‘male power’ by ‘female power’ clearly corroborates the hypothesis of male power as being the main cause of violence and decay. Indeed, because of the patriarchal aspect of Nigerian society depicted in Achebe’s novels, Eunice who struggles against oppression recaptures her identity instead of sinking into decay like Okonkwo. It is obvious that Eunice resorts to violence (she shot down the murderers of her fiancé Max) in order to heighten the image of the African woman of which she is the representative. The same situation applies for Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross*¹¹ where Warrĩnga shoots down the Rich Old Man in her struggle against oppression. In the same way, Eunice’s sense of duty has urged her to use violence for honour. But contrary to Okonkwo, her personality does not wane simply because of the order and hierarchy in her society which is rather in favour of male superiority. There is no decay at the epicentre of the overlapping of honour, sense of duty, and female power.

The Umuofia society is organised in such a way that man must progress on the paradigmatic axis if he wants to be respected. The syntagmatic axis is thus reserved for women or for men who ‘cannot achieve manliness’, that is for men who cannot leave the ‘female axis’ and move upward on the axis of manliness. In fact, the combination ‘female power’/ ‘honour’ does not lead to decline because the upward movement of women on the paradigmatic axis is synonymous with reassessment. It is an amelioration of their status and cannot be regarded as a decline. This is why when Eunice (*A Man of the People*) and Warrĩnga (*Devil on the Cross*) finally got rid of their male oppressors, they recaptured their identity and re-place themselves at a higher level on the paradigmatic axis and on the scale of

¹⁰ Chinua Achebe. *A Man of the People*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1966.

¹¹ Ngugi Wa Thiong’O. *Devil on the Cross*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1987.

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order and hierarchy. As a matter of fact, Okonkwo who loses some of his attributes is, in a certain way, excluded from the circle of respected men. He is no longer a source of pride and, thus, falls down to the level of women just like his *agbala* father. His movement on the paradigmatic axis, as we show on chart n°3 in the appendix, is a negative one.

The only element resulting from the imbrications of the three themes is a violence used as a weapon for Eunice, and which is different from the one in the case of Okonkwo. In the first case, it is used at the individual level to get rid of the oppressor, whereas in the second it affects the whole society. And because the violence in the case of Okonkwo is not circumscribed to just one individual, the collateral damages are not controllable. That is why '*things fall apart*'.

To highlight Okonkwo's failure, the author puts him aloof, being not concerned with the various changes that have affected the Umuofia society. At this point, the author shows one of the most important roles played by exile which is used as a device to make Okonkwo safe from alteration. The confrontation is no longer between Okonkwo and his society, but between his cultural beliefs and European culture. As a matter of fact, Europeans having succeeded in convincing a large part of the Igbo people, Okonkwo becomes an individual fighter in Umuofia. His success and failure repose on his ability to make an appropriate synthesis of the three values that make up his personality: male power, honour, and sense of duty.

Okonkwo lives in a society in which male power is at the centre of traditional beliefs. The patriarchy he is inculcated by ancestral traditions urges him to adopt an attitude of superiority over women by beating his wives for various reasons. He who has become very famous as early as the age of eighteen is blinded by fame. Consequently, his main concern is to stay at the paroxysm of his power and for that, all means are good. Okonkwo's character shifts then from a popular hero to a Machiavellian 'antihero'. That shift shows that violence is an inevitable result of the changes which have affected Okonkwo's society because, for Okonkwo, the only answer to that invasion is violence.

The author epitomises Okonkwo's tragedy as a character victim of the violence of society on the one hand, but also of himself on the other. In fact, there are different types of violence characterising the Umuofia society. There is first the violence brought and exercised over the Umuofia people by European colonisers. This violence is more physical and it opposes two

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people or two cultures. The second type of violence is more poignant and is imposed by traditions on the individual. For example, it is in the name of traditions that many things happen: twin children are killed deliberately to avoid a curse that may hit the village; Okonkwo is banished for seven years for having killed inadvertently a Klansman; young Ikemefuna is sacrificed to Ani, the Earth goddess to render justice after the murder of a member of the neighbouring village; Okonkwo resorts to wife-battery to show one aspect of his manliness; even after his death, the traditions do not allow his Klansmen to bury him...

There is also the individual violence Okonkwo exercises on his own personality. This violence is first psychological. He believes firmly in the necessity to recapture his lost identity. For the purpose, he imposes himself some poignant principles to which he tries to stick. This leads to his suicide which represents the physical aspect of his own violence. In return, the novel ends tragically with the death of both the white man and the main character. He has preferred to hang himself rather than fall into captivity. Rather than assuming his actions, he tries to save the little honour that remains for him. But in doing so, he casts off that honour he tries to keep by all cost.

It is obvious that the last chapters of *Things Fall Apart* portray an Okonkwo who becomes aware of his failure, and who tries to recapture his identity and dignity. He is no longer the man who "said yes strongly; so his chi agreed" (*TFA*, p.27). Unfortunately for Okonkwo, awareness occurs lately. Even the efforts he makes to keep the least he could of his honour proves to be useless. In effect, the fact of committing suicide to imprisonment is regarded as an abomination: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen." (*TFA*, p.207). Okonkwo is rejected even as a dead man simply because, as one of the clansmen said, "it is against [their] custom." (*TFA*, p.207). However, the narrator expresses some compassion through the character Obierika:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's body, turned *suddenly* to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "*That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog...*" He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words. (*TFA*, p.208)
[My emphasis]

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The narrator even attributes the responsibility of Okonkwo's death to the District Commissioner's men. This can be interpreted as a device used by Achebe to denounce the negative and violent aspects of the arrival of the colonisers in Africa in general and in Nigeria particularly. *Things Fall Apart* can also be regarded as a novel through which Achebe epitomises the absurdity of certain customs which have some devastating effects on the individual and on society as a whole. There is a call for awareness, a call for a good symbiosis of African and European cultures, which Okonkwo has failed to do properly. His decline as well as his tragic end are thus a logical outcome of that failure.

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APPENDIX

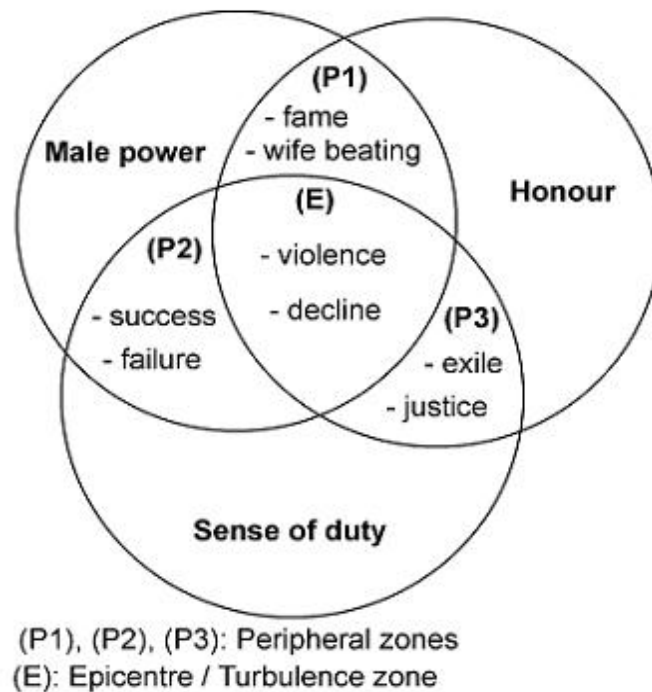


Chart n° 1

Okonkwo's moral losses in *Things Fall Apart*

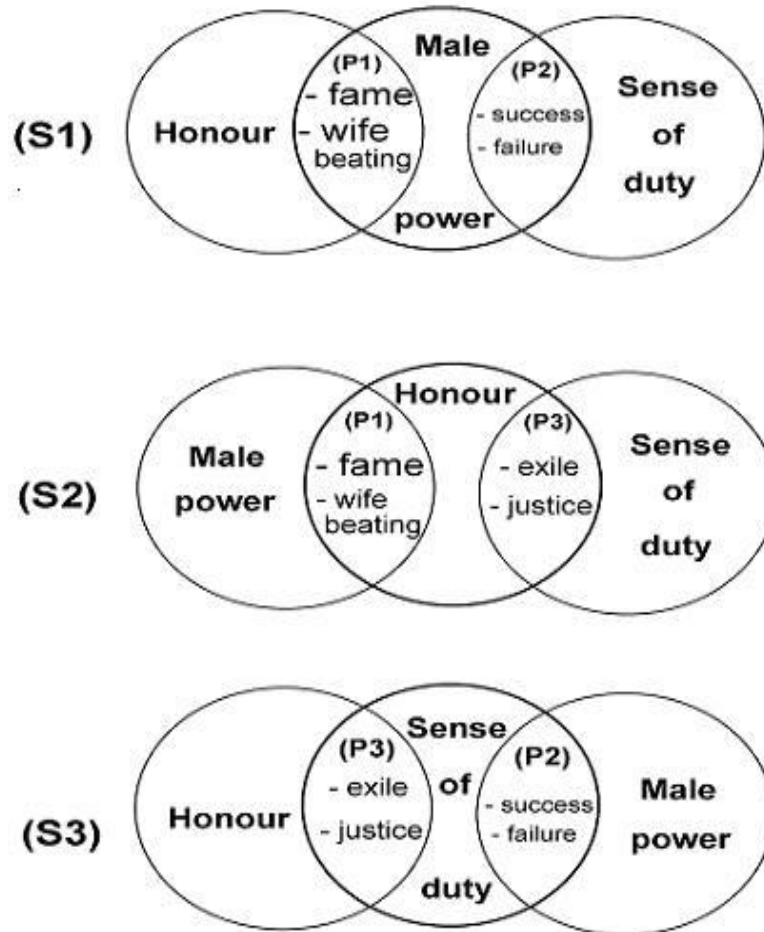


Chart n°2

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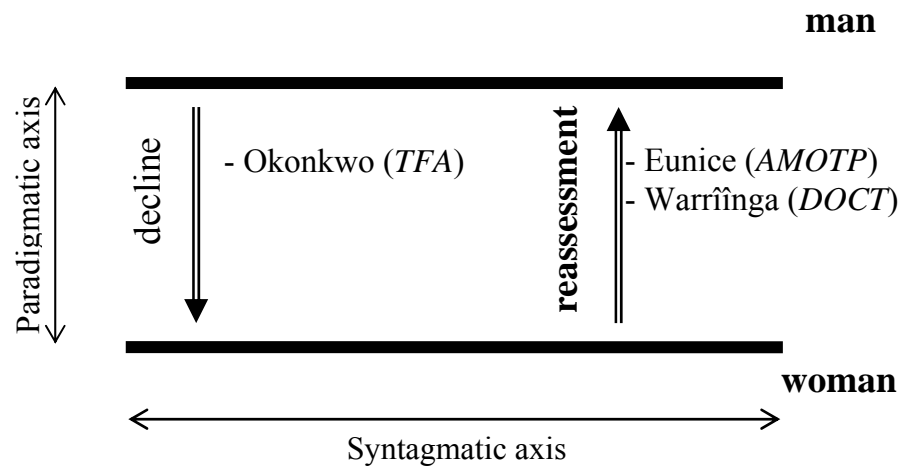


Chart n°3