



## Interrogating the Concept of Tragedy in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Ikemefuna as a Forgotten Hero

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**Abstract:** Chinua Achebe's renowned novel, *Things Fall Apart* is a typical example of pure tragedy as it arouses pity and fear while the main character suffers a misfortune. A lot of literary studies such as Nnoromele (2010), Adade-Yeboah, and Owusu (2013), have all adjudged Okonkwo as the tragic hero of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* basing their arguments on Classical tragedies. However, few of these studies have paid detailed attention to the character of Ikemefuna as a tragic hero. Given this, this paper seeks to argue that Ikemefuna also qualifies as the tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The study adopted Arthur Miller's theory of the Common Man as the theoretical framework and a Qualitative research approach. Purposive sampling method was used for this study. Textual analysis was also employed. The study found that Ikemefuna is also the tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, as he is the only common man of lowly birth who tries to "elevate himself justly" from his society but suffers a misfortune. Again, the author projects Ikemefuna as a tragic hero through literary stylistic elements such as foreshadowing, irony, contrast, evocative diction, narrative intimacy, and symbolism. In furtherance, he naturally earned trust, affection, and served as an inspiration, unlike his foil, Okonkwo, who was obsessive, forceful, and rigid just to elevate himself. The study recommends that future researchers pay detailed attention to similar characters in other African novels since few literary works can be found on this subject. Again, it recommends that researchers adopt Miller's *Tragedy of the Common Man* to analyze African literature on tragedy, since there is limited attention given to this subject.

**Keywords:** Common Man, Elevate, Forgotten Hero, Misfortune, Tragic Hero, Tragedy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Tragedy in ordinary usage implies disaster, usually resulting in death. For an occurrence to be classified as a tragedy, it must take place in unexpected and striking circumstances, and it must at least be in some way remarkable (Bereton, 2020). Purwarno and Irawati (2008) add that Tragedy can be any serious and dignified drama that describes a conflict between a hero and a superior factor (destiny, society, god, chance) and reaches a sorrowful point that arouses pity and fear in the readers.

Chinua Achebe's novel, "Things Fall Apart," which was first published in 1958, is regarded as a groundbreaking work of African literature and has received critical acclaim from scholars around the world. Achebe presents a tragic story of how an Igbo warrior, Okonkwo, and the entire Umuofia land, together with its rich culture, fell apart after its encounter with the Europeans. As a masterpiece of post-colonial literature, it has received critical acclaim from scholars around the world. One of the prominent areas that has garnered much literary attention is the analysis of the tragic hero in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Nnoromele (2010) wrote a paper on "The Plight of a Hero in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The researcher defines Okonkwo as the tragic hero in the novel in that, though Okonkwo committed suicide at the end of the day, his suicidal act was an ultimate expression of the compound effects of his own experiences in his relentless desire to become a hero. The reason he had to depart from the battlefield was one. He adds that a hero would rather die than be taken captive by an enemy. Adade-Yeboah and Owusu, (2013), also wrote a paper on "The Tragic Hero of the Modern Period". In their write-up, they described Okonkwo as the tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* based on the Aristotelian tragedy in that the tragic hero can see beforehand what is in store for him yet he decides to pursue his own course, even though the tragic hero must suffer for upholding a cultural principle, yet this stand is against the cultural principles of the society. Hence, the tragic hero is seen as a social impediment.

All these researchers based their findings on the assertion that Okonkwo is the tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* supporting their claims with the classical tragedy. Given that the classical tragedy approach to analyzing a tragic hero has received a considerable attention, this paper seeks to argue that Ikemefuna is a forgotten tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* based on Arthur Miller's *Tragedy and the Common Man*.

The study seeks to carry out the following objectives;

1. To argue that Ikemefuna is a forgotten tragic hero.
2. To examine how the stylistic elements project tragedy.

### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is *Tragedy and the Common Man* by Arthur Miller. Before the introduction of modern tragedies, Ancient Greek tragedies or the Aristotelian tragedy outlined some tenets of tragedy such as Nobility, hubris, Pathos, Catharsis, and hamartia which feature noble characters as protagonists due to their high rank in society. These characters fall from their status because of a flaw. Due to social their status, their downfall or misfortune arouses pity and fear in the eyes of the audience. The fact that these noble people could fall from such a high rank was what aroused the audience's interest in tragedies. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* is a seminal work that is a quintessential example of Aristotle's concept of tragedy as the eponymous character *Oedipus Rex* fulfills all the key elements outlined in the poetics of Aristotle. Other works such as Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are Not to Blame*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth* all by the famous playwright, William Shakespeare. However, people of such royalty are very few in today's modern world and this is what Arthur Miller discusses in his essay, "Tragedy and the Common Man". In his essay, he argues that although we do not have many people of a noble rank as in the days of Greek Tragedies, there are still tragedies associated with the common man. Miller states "I believe that the common man is as apt a subject of tragedy in its highest sense as kings once were" (p.148). Miller argues that being a person of nobility or high status is not a requirement for tragedy and that anybody who fits his description of a tragic hero can be classified as one. According to Miller, a tragic hero should meet the following criteria;

1. The tragic hero should be a common man in society and not one who is of a higher rank or status. The outcome of Miller's overall revision of poetics is that there is a shift from (Aristotle's focus on) the form of tragedy to the content of tragedy; in other words, the American dramatist shifted the genre's interest from plot to theme. In other words, the American dramatist shifted the genre's interest from plot to theme. Besides, Miller has also overlooked Aristotle's concept of Katharsis and has drawn the portrait of the tragic hero from the lower classes rather than from the higher ones. The reason is that the common man is more representative of modern societies than the highbred (Guendouzi, (2006)
2. The tragic hero suffers from Betrayal of trust/ disappointment. This situation can be likened to the plight of the protagonist Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. In Act 3 Scene 1 When in the face of danger, Julius finds Brutus, his friend, and thinking that he will be saved, Brutus removes his dagger and stabs him to death. Out of disappointment and shock, Julius exclaims, "Et tu Brutu" meaning, "You too Brutus" (*Julius Caesar*, p.51). This and many others such as Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart* also suffer the same disappointment/betrayal of trust.
3. Again, the tragic hero according to Miller should not necessarily have a tragic flaw. As regards the tragic flaw, the modern tragic hero does not have a personal characteristic or a mistake that leads to their downfall but rather a flaw that is associated with society. Miller posits that the *Common Man* is caught in a web of social political, cultural, and economic forces that are beyond his control. He is forced to compromise his beliefs and values to survive in a world that is hostile to his dreams, and his struggle to maintain his integrity in the face of overwhelming adversity is what makes him a tragic figure. In the words of Miller, "Tragedy, then, is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly (p.149).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study seeks to adopt the qualitative research approach with a textual analysis of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as the main method of the study. According to Myres (2007), the qualitative research

method is the best method suitable for research into social and cultural phenomena since it is concerned with understanding people and the sociocultural contexts within which they live, why people behave the way they do, their knowledge, attitude, beliefs, and fears. Since Achebe's Novel, *Things Fall Apart*, deals with human experiences in life and takes into account the culture, tradition, setting, and belief among other dynamics that define the Igbo people, the researcher found this research method suitable for this study. This is because it will help the researcher achieve his objectives by examining how Achebe portrays the character of Ikemefuna as a forgotten tragic hero in *Things Fall Apart*. In furtherance, the Purposive sampling method was used for this study as the primary text contains elements of tragedy and is hence appropriate for the study. Textual analysis was also employed in the analysis and guided by the theory mentioned earlier.

### 3.1. Summary of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" presents the tragic story of not only characters like Ikemefuna and Okonkwo but the whole of the Umuofia clan. Achebe describes Umuofia as a land that "was feared by all its neighbors. It was powerful in war and magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (Achebe, p.16) until the invasion of their land and the eclipse of their culture by the Europeans. It recounts the journey of Okonkwo who is determined to overcome the shame of his lazy father, Unoka. Okonkwo rises through hard work, wrestling prowess, and bravery in battle to become wealthy and influential. He becomes the caretaker of Ikemefuna, a boy given to Umuofia as compensation from a neighboring village to avoid future wars. During Ikemefuna's time with Okonkwo's family, Ikemefuna adapts well, forming strong bonds and serving as a positive role model for Nwoye, Okonkwo's son. He brings joy and stability to the household and is seen as a son and brother. Despite warnings from the elders of the clan, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna to prove that he is not weak or coward like his father. Following this event, Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman during a funeral ceremony and he is banished. Having returned from exile, Okonkwo finds a sudden cultural change in his village as it is weakened by colonial influence. Out of his hatred for the foreign culture, he kills a colonial messenger in a bid to incite rebellion but fails to gain the support of his clan. Realizing that his traditional world has irrevocably changed, Okonkwo dies by suicide, an act considered an abomination by his people.

### 3.2. Who Is Ikemefuna?

Ikemefuna, a fifteen-year-old boy from Mbaino, a neighboring town is sacrificed to Umuofia as retribution for killing one of Umuofia's ladies. He is given to Okonkwo by the clan to look after him in the interim. "...for three years, Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household" (Achebe, p.17). Achebe describes him as by nature a very lively boy who had gradually become popular in Okonkwo's household. He becomes quite close to Nwoye due to his "all-knowing" nature such that, "He could fashion out flutes from bamboo stems and even from the elephant grass" (Achebe, p.31). Okonkwo became fond of him such that he treated him like every other person did. Okonkwo's love for the boy grew strong such that anytime he went to meetings, he allowed the boy to carry his stool and his goatskin bag like a son. His life comes to a halt when the village oracle of Umuofia eventually decrees that Ikemefuna must be killed as a sacrifice to the gods. Eventually, he gets killed by Okonkwo as a sacrifice to the gods to appease the gods and prevent any potential harm.

### 3.3. Ikemefuna as a Forgotten Tragic Hero

The argument is that Ikemefuna is a forgotten tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* based on Arthur Miller's *Tragedy and the Common Man*. The argument is that Ikemefuna is also a tragic hero but has not been in the spotlight or has not been given the needed attention in research. As stated earlier in the theoretical framework, the tragic hero should fit the following criteria;

To begin, as Miller argues, the tragic hero should be a common man in society and not one with a higher rank. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ikemefuna fits the perfect description as a tragic hero. He was just a common man, not one with any high rank or status. We find him as someone who sought to elevate himself in the society. Through the third person point of view, the author presents how Ikemefuna began to rise and flourish.

"For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household and the elders of Umuofia seemed to have forgotten about him. He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season and was full of the sap of life" (Achebe, 1958, p.33).

From the above, his comparison with the yam, subtly affirms the fact that he was flourishing in the household which equates to elevating himself justly. This image does not only reflect vitality and potential but also subtly alludes to his youth cut short—a yam tendril can be plucked or destroyed as easily as it grows. This is why he was an ill-fated lad who was given to Okonkwo by the elders as a peace pipe relic. Again, he was only a boy who did not know his left from right who was gripped by fear at the initial stage and wanted to run away; but as time went by, he became popular in Okonkwo's house, especially with Nwoye. As the forgotten hero, Achebe projects him through indirect characterization. He was a minor character with limited information about him. He then supports or compliments the character of Okonkwo, the protagonist who is seen as “one of the greatest men of his time” (Achebe, p.12). Through this supportive role, he becomes forgotten as a hero because Okonkwo's fame overshadowed him. Achebe uses contrasts to register or embody innocence and vulnerability in Ikemefuna as against Okonkwo's stern masculinity and rigid adherence to tradition. This resonates with Miller's belief that the tragic hero is not necessarily a grand figure, but someone who cannot “remain passive in the face of indignity.”

Again, he lacked a tragic flaw. According to Miller, the tragic hero should not necessarily have a tragic flaw. The cause of his tragedy is not due to his inherent flaw but a result of society's norms and practices. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ikemefuna is the epitome of this assertion about the tragic hero. He represents the common man who is placed in extraordinary circumstances. He is a victim of society's beliefs and practices which require human sacrifices to appease the gods. In the opening lines of chapter seven, the narrator reveals it seemed the elders of Umuofia had forgotten Ikemefuna but not the oracle. For three years Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household, He was wholly absorbed into the family and Okonkwo became fond of him. Suddenly, his death is foreshadowed by the Oracle's decree and the elders' decision, creating an atmosphere of impending doom which is fulfilled later. “.... Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down” (Achebe, 1958 p.60). Ikemefuna dies through no fault of his but as a result of some cruel traditions and customs regarding the Igbos in Achebe's novel. Okonkwo on the other hand, Okonkwo had a tragic flaw which was fear. “He was afraid of being thought weak” (Achebe, p.60). This also suggests that Ikemefuna was a victim of a masculine society which made Okonkwo believe that killing Ikemefuna would prove his strength and loyalty to the Village so that he is not nicknamed “a woman”, thus proving his masculine, or prowess. This confirms that he had no tragic flaw and heightens the emotional impact of his death, making it a poignant moment of loss and betrayal. In furtherance, the tragic hero according to Arthur Miller suffers betrayal of trust/disappointment. In Achebe's novel, Ikemefuna fits appropriately the mentioned criteria. He suffers a betrayal of trust from his “father”, Okonkwo. Even though Ikemefuna is destined to be used as “a sacrificial lamb” as custom demands, the gods did not specifically order Okonkwo to participate in the event. The fact is that Okonkwo was free to choose not to participate in Ikemefuna's execution (Iyasere, (1992). Even before the execution of Ikemefuna, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected elder in Umuofia who understands its values and traditions and the habits of the gods, warns Okonkwo against the killing of the boy. He says:

“That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death.”

Okonkwo was surprised, and was about to say some things when the old man continued:

"Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it.

They will take him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you father.”(Achebe p.59-60)

This highlights a betrayal of trust in Ikemefuna, as the tragic hero suffers as a result of Okonkwo's tragic flaw as stated earlier. Textually, Achebe uses dramatic irony to heighten the pathos or emotions surrounding Ikemefuna's death. This is because the reader knows Ikemefuna is pushed to his execution, but the boy himself believes he is returning home. Ikemefuna's thoughts were only filled with hope and trust in Okonkwo. Unbeknownst to him, the betrayal was the price. This irony depicts his misplaced trust in Okonkwo, whom he calls “father” deepening the depth of the tragedy. One could argue that Ikemefuna's voice in his final cry “My father, they have killed me!” emphasizes his humanity, and Achebe ensures the readers view the killing of Ikemefuna as a profound injustice or a betrayal. This sympathetic and ominous tone aligns with Miller's emphasis on the audience's pity: Ikemefuna's dignity and virtue make his tragic end all the more moving, pathetic and engaging. This confirms that His journey, which begins in hope, ends in betrayal, and thus aligns with Miller's idea that tragedy comes from the gap between a character's ideals and the harshness of reality.

### 3.4. Findings of the study

The study sought to argue that Ikemefuna is a forgotten hero tragic hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In the discussion, the paper is based on Arthur Miller's Tragedy and the Common Man to make its Based on Arthur Miller's principle of tragedy and the common man , the paper notes the following :. The researcher found that;

1. Ikemefuna is the tragic hero since he is only a common man, a lad who is given to Umuofia as a "sacrificial lamb".
2. Again, he does not necessarily have a tragic flaw. His flaw is a result of the brutal customs and traditions of the Igbo people.
3. Ikemefuna is a victim of betrayal of trust since he is betrayed by "his father", Okonkwo who willingly participates in his death.
4. Again, various stylistic elements such as foreshadowing, irony, characterization, contrast, evocative diction, narrative intimacy, and projects the forgotten tragic Ikemefuna

### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the paper concludes that Ikemefuna is the tragic hero of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* because he is a young, ordinary boy achieving a rightful place in society (as Okonkwo's beloved son) and faced his fate with personal dignity. His "tragic flaw," if any, is simply his trust and loyalty, traits that become fatal in a rigid society. By scrutinizing the boy through Miller's lens, we see that Ikemefuna genuinely embodies the modern tragic hero. In this light, he emerges as a "forgotten hero" of *Things Fall Apart*, his overlooked courage and suffering highlighting the novel's poignant message about human dignity and loss which are integral parts of tragedy.

### 5. RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that future researchers pay detailed attention to similar characters in other African novels since few literary works can be found on this subject. Again, it recommends that researchers adopt Miller's Tragedy of the Common Man to analyze African literature on tragedy since there is limited attention given to this subject.

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