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Ezinma: The Ogbanje Child in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) is commonly read as a testimony of the cultural confrontation during the period of British colonialism.¹ For the non-African it is an obvious beginner's text to discover the West African, specifically Igbo, culture. The book is at once a cultural resource, a historical novel, a morality tale, and above all a great literary work that celebrates its own cultural milieu and renders it familiar to others. Although written in English, *Things Fall Apart* is an African storyteller's story, making greater use of African folktale elements than of Western narrative conventions. In the Igbo village-clan Umuofia, time is measured by generations, seasons, lunar cycles, planting, and harvest festivals. The past exists concurrent with the present in the tales told by parents to children, by elders to youngsters, through the *egwugwu* processions where ancestral spirits preside over domestic disputes. Dwarfing the physical world is a spiritual expanse where the living constantly interact with their ancestors, with personal *chis* and nature deities under the watchful eyes of Chukwu, the supreme god. But the novel's strength can also be its Achilles' heel. Because *Things Fall Apart* is full of delightful exposition of Igbo life, it tempts us to use it as a cultural guide. Indeed, we learn a great deal about Igbo society: its history, wars, religion, rituals, music, and social customs before and during the early phase of colonialism. Yet this material is inextricably bound up with Achebe's vivid characterizations, which carry the human story and thus define the book as first and foremost a novel.

Achebe's central characters bridge the literary and cultural contexts. Their cultural identity is fully integrated with their characterization as literary figures, and it influences the nature and outcome of their actions, personal conflicts, and relationships with other characters. The most noticeably integrated character is Okonkwo, the novel's protagonist. As numerous critics have observed, Okonkwo is at once an allegorical everyman figure embodying the existential paradoxes of the Igbo culture in transition, and a great tragic hero in the tradition of Oedipus, Antigone, and Lear (see Iyasere). Less obvious, though neither less complex nor less compelling, is the synthesis Achebe achieves in Ezinma's characterization. Although the *ogbanje* child appears primarily in Part One (we only catch brief glimpses of her in the rest of the novel), her character resonates throughout *Things Fall Apart*. Ezinma belongs at once to Achebe's luscious cultural tapestry and to the literary context of his novel. A complex character in her own right, she also reinforces the notion of the primacy of the female principle,

which Achebe offers as a counterpoint to the traditionally nearsighted masculine value system of Okonkwo. As importantly, Ezinma functions as a symbol for the resilience of the Igbo traditions in the face of staggering changes during British colonialism.

In cultural terms Ezinma's story allows Achebe to describe the *ogbanje* as a phenomenon of traditional Igbo life. Considered a "living dead," the *ogbanje* cycles back and forth between the worlds of humans and spirits. Alive for only a few years, the troublesome child can continue the cycle indefinitely. While the phenomenon offers a comforting and sublime explanation for the high rate of infant mortality in Igbo societies, the woman carrying an *ogbanje* must nevertheless suffer the troubles that the journeying "repeater" causes. She must, as Ekwefi does, devote herself entirely to the care and nurturing of this special child, making sure not to tempt his or her death. A village might scar or mutilate such infants so that they will be marked upon return. However, ending the movement of the child between the two worlds is beyond ordinary human control. Only a medicine-man or a priest who can communicate with the spiritual realm can force an *ogbanje* to stay. Such a person may be able to locate and destroy the *ogbanje's iyi-uwa*, a stone that the *ogbanje* buries upon arrival and that serves as the link between human and spirit worlds.

But Ezinma's *ogbanje* nature can only partly explain her prominence in the novel, since Achebe does not present her as merely a cultural "artifact." Rather she develops, as do most literary characters, by means of the relationships she has with the people around her. And appropriately, her relationships with Ekwefi, Chielo, and Okonkwo are mutually significant and contribute to the characterization of each.

As would be expected of a girl, Ezinma spends much of her life among the womenfolk, even though she has an unusually close relationship with her father. With her mother, Ezinma is more forthright and inquisitive than her brother and sisters. In a typical scene with Ekwefi, she notices that her mother is able to lift a pot from a fire with bare hands. "Ekwefi," she asks, "is it true that when people are grown up, fire does not burn them?" After Ekwefi replies with a weary "yes" and notes that her daughter "was only ten years old but she was wiser than her years," Ezinma continues her questioning. She announces that her eyelid is twitching. "It means you are going to cry," answers her mother. "No," says Ezinma, "it is this eyelid, the top one." Ekwefi's reply, "That means you will see something," does not pacify the girl. "What will I see?" she demands. "How can I know?" answers an exasperated Ekwefi, perhaps with more meaning than she realizes (41). After all, Ezinma does have an unsettling sense of her environment; she is privy to the mysteries of both the human and the spirit realms.

Ezinma also knows that she can push her mother for attention and favors. Ekwefi has devoted her life to ensuring that the *ogbanje* she has brought into the world remains there. The perpetually tenuous existence of her daughter causes Ekwefi great anxiety, and she must accept that Ezinma's stay is not guaranteed, no matter how well Ezinma is nurtured. As a result, Ekwefi treats her daughter less as a child than as a creature that needs to be appeased. She grants her daughter an intimacy that is uncommon between the other mothers and children in Okonkwo's compound. She allows Ezinma to call her by her first name. She secretly permits Ezinma to eat eggs, which Okonkwo has expressly forbidden any of his children to have. (And true to form, "After her father's rebuke [Ezinma] developed an even keener appetite for eggs"

[73].) The extent of Ekwefi's self-sacrificing love is most apparent when she disobeys social and spiritual customs and decides to follow Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, and her daughter during the night journey to the cave:

And so when the priestess with Ezinma on her back disappeared through a hole hardly big enough to pass a hen, Ekwefi broke into a run as though to stop them. As she stood gazing at the circular darkness which had swallowed them, tears gushed from her eyes, and she swore within her that if she heard Ezinma cry she would rush into the cave to defend her against all the gods in the world. She would die with her. (102)

As Ekwefi mothers her unusual child, she realizes that she is not Ezinma's only caretaker. Ezinma has strong connections with Umuofia's earthly representatives of the spirit world. The most important of these bonds is that between her and Chielo, Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Chielo often meets Ekwefi at the market and shows a special interest in Ezinma, whom she calls "my daughter" (48). She counsels Ekwefi in matters regarding the child. Chielo, who leads a double existence as a widowed mother of two and as a priestess, is in a sense a second, spiritual mother to Ezinma. Both she and Ekwefi love her, but Chielo shares with Ezinma the ability to see beyond human existence and to understand that other dimension that so affects the girl. In one intriguing scene Chielo asks Ekwefi how Ezinma is. "She has been very well for some time now. Perhaps she has come to stay," answers Ekwefi. "I think she has," Chielo says; "They usually stay if they do not die before the age of six" (48). While the villagers know that *ogbanjes* who survive infancy usually live, Chielo's words have a deeper meaning. Soon after this conversation, after the child has become ill, she comes to take Ezinma on the mysterious night journey to the oracle. This turns out to be a journey of healing and release for Ezinma, the last one she takes to the spirit world. After Chielo brings her back to Ekwefi and Okonkwo, Ezinma appears to stabilize. She grows into a healthy and beautiful woman. Perhaps the only surviving *ogbanje* characteristic is Ezinma's periodic moodiness, when the only person she can tolerate is her father (159).

In her relationship with Okonkwo, Ezinma seems aware that her father's uncommonly loving attitude toward her is partly due to his troubled relationship with the spirit world. Because of her peculiar spirituality as an *ogbanje*, Ezinma's love can give great comfort to a man who has offended the deities by beating his wife during the Week of Peace and by killing Ikemefuna, who called him "father." However, their relationship also involves strong natural parent-child ties that bring out his emotional, "feminine" side.

Okonkwo has grown up ashamed of his own father's parasitism and lack of "manliness" and is determined to live a very different life—one where he will be in control of his money, his crops, and his women. This desire to be strong and well respected pushes Okonkwo to become a man of great stature in Umuofia. Okonkwo treats Ezinma as would any father who remembers the trauma he and Ekwefi have gone through in coping with the "repeater" infant. After 10 rebirths, when Ezinma seems inclined to stay, Okonkwo accepts the child who comes after such struggle; he

admires her gift for survival, her strength to resist wandering between the spiritual and human worlds: “If Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit,” Okonkwo tells his friend Obierika (63). For this daughter the normally stoic Okonkwo will do things he would never do for anyone else. Only Ezinma can awaken Okonkwo’s suppressed qualities. On account of her, he is tender, nurturing, and submissive. During his remorseful isolation after stabbing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo allows only Ezinma to enter his hut to bring him food and tolerates her mother-like scolding: “You have not eaten for two days,” she criticizes him, “so you must finish this” (61). He instigates, albeit in a blustery manner, the search for Ezinma’s *iyi-uwa*. He even comes into Ekwefi’s hut the night Ezinma falls ill and tends to his daughter himself—a display of warmth out of character for Umuofia fathers. On the night when Chielo takes Ezinma on a spiritual journey to the Oracle’s cave, Okonkwo disobeys the priestess and, like his wife, secretly follows his daughter. When he cannot find his wife and daughter after several searches, he admits that he “had become gravely worried” (106). And when the couple finally find one another at the mouth of the cave, Okonkwo takes Ekwefi in his arms, the only act of uninhibited love he allows himself throughout the novel.

The intimacy Achebe establishes between Ezinma and her father is particularly noteworthy because it confirms Okonkwo’s ambivalent attitude toward the female, which the author hints at throughout the novel. On the one hand, we see Okonkwo stubbornly suppressing both the women around him and what he views as feminine traits—expressions of emotion, romance, lack of physical strength, failures in authority and reason, and so on. A stern husband, he responds disapprovingly to Obierika’s story of the old married couple who “had one mind” (66). He dismisses as “a woman’s tale” the folktale about the Ear and the Mosquito, which celebrates the primacy of women (72). And he attributes his son Nwoye’s lack of interest in warfare and stories of heroism to the too many hours Nwoye has spent listening to his mother’s stories. On the other hand, Achebe shows us that Okonkwo himself is not immune to emotional excesses, as evident in his abuse of his wives over trivial disagreements. Similarly, he seeks refuge in his “motherland” when he commits a “female” crime by mistakenly killing a boy during Ezeudu’s funeral (117). Above all, the child who pleases him the most is not his son but his daughter Ezinma. These ironic juxtapositions of Okonkwo’s manliness and the circumstances of his life ultimately betray the fallacy of an exclusively masculine ethos. If Ezinma is a source of comfort for Okonkwo throughout his troubled life, it is because she subdues his manhood, balancing the masculine and the feminine attributes to make him a full person.²

With the exception of Okonkwo, Ezinma is the most pivotal character in *Things Fall Apart*. Grappling with her own tentative nature and the anxiety of others, she not only displays a unique personality but serves to reveal the psychological depth of those characters with whom she interacts—Okonkwo, Ekwefi, and Chielo. However, just at the peak of her prominence at the end of Part One, Achebe pushes Ezinma into the background and focuses instead on Okonkwo’s exile and the cultural upheaval in Umuofia after the arrival of Christian missionaries. The author allows us glimpses of Ezinma on only a few occasions, as if to suggest that his undermining of the *ogbanje* child is deliberate and significant. Indeed it is. While Ezinma may become relatively

peripheral to plot and character development after Part One, she assumes a complex symbolic identity—one that is crucial to Achebe's message.

Ezinma loses her prominence partly because the culture that validates her identity is seriously challenged by the introduction of the alien values of Christianity. In traditional Umuofia, prior to the arrival of the Europeans, the *ogbanje* child has been the tangible evidence of the intertwined Igbo cosmos, unifying the human and the spiritual in one earthly body. The missionaries replace Chukwu with the Judeo-Christian God, personal *chis* with Christ, the medicine-men and priestesses with Christian ministers. As a result the unity of the Igbo cosmos is threatened by the Christian theology, which prescribes a strictly mediated communion between the human and the divine. In this context the *ogbanje* can be little more than a reminder of the past.

Yet for Achebe this reminder is ultimately crucial. He places a great deal of faith in the power of the past to heal the wounds of the present. Ezinma is a vivid expression of his faith. Amid pervasive change, she stands out as a symbol of hope, renewal, and continuity for both Okonkwo and Umuofia. After all, the *ogbanje's* cycle of births and deaths attests as much to cosmic unity as it does to the human determination to survive even in the gravest adversity. During his exile in Mbanta, Okonkwo views Ezinma as his most permanent link to his native village. He may lose Nwoye to Christianity, but he can count on Ezinma as a kindred spirit. She shares his bitterness about being away from home. During the family's last harvest in Mbanta, she goes about violently uprooting cassava tubers, blaming the small crop on the "poor soil" of exile (153). On Okonkwo's request she agrees to turn down her many suitors in Mbanta in order to marry in Umuofia (159). Ezinma will be her father's offering to Umuofia, enabling him "to return with a flourish and regain the seven wasted years" (157).

Regarding Umuofia's uncertain destiny, the *ogbanje* child again bears the promise of continuity and renewal. With the arrival of the Christian mission, the Umuofia residents become like "living dead" themselves, on the one hand suffering the clash of the alien with the traditional, and on the other trusting their determination to transcend the chaotic present with a renewed sense of cultural identity. In this context the pattern of the *ogbanje* child becomes the pattern of the life and history of Nigeria—one that trusts and celebrates cyclical renewal against the linear, "progressive" course of history introduced by Western culture.

Ezinma offers us a wonderful symbol for Achebe's novel as a narrative that exploits the peculiar dynamics between culture and literature. While the book derives much of its energy from the cultural circumstances that prompted its conception, it also attempts to supersede these circumstances in order to claim a life of its own. The literary work lends form and permanence to its inherently transient cultural milieu. In turn, to read *Things Fall Apart* as solely a cultural document is to extract what is inextricable: like the *ogbanje* the novel embodies both the cycle of rebirths (which is essentially cultural history) and the child who ultimately lives.

NOTES

¹We thank the staff of the interdisciplinary Change and Tradition program at Butler University, Indianapolis, for invaluable input and encouragement.

²As one of the *College Literature* reviewers suggests, Okonkwo and Ezinma's relationship contributes to the larger dynamics between male and female principles that Achebe explores throughout the novel. We thank the reviewer for this insight.

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