

## DESIGNATION OF HUMAN VALUES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART: AN AXIOLOGICAL STUDY

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### Abstract

*Things Fall Apart* has generated controversy in the way readers and interpreters view its designation of human values. Achebe laid the foundation, while his readers and interpreters took the polemic farther. Now, since axiology is a branch of philosophy that basically deals with values and valuations, and since none of the earlier studies carried out such a dicey and value-related endeavour following strict axiological principles, this essay embraces some axiological principles and theories in studying *Things Fall Apart*. The aim is to retell the story to reveal some compatibility and harmony rather than incompatibility and disharmony among the characters as appraised in the earlier studies. The method of study is hermeneutic, since the success of this research heavily depends on interpreting and analysing the various terms that were misconstrued by earlier studies. Against this backdrop, the essay makes the following two recommendations: First, a greater open-mindedness, beyond the biases and prejudices of an author (not just Achebe), should be employed in the reading of any text. Second, society today should interpret human values or giftedness beyond the binoculars of success versus failure, bravery versus cowardice, or even strength versus laziness, etc., as noticeable in the work under review. After all, every quality has meaning only within the context in which it is found to be so; otherwise, it will be found wanting and then be committed to the flames.

**Key Terms:** *things fall apart*, Axiological, Human Values, Designation

### Introduction

It is within the realm of an inquiring and patient mind to plunge into the many data points that could be presented as far as the idea of the designation of human values is concerned. Little wonder one could notice that in the world of literature, just as in our daily discussions, many authors and narrators presume certain axiological credentials or stances to term some people happy and others sad, some successful and others unsuccessful, some strong and others weak, and the list could go endlessly.

This designative posture, devoid of some axiological principles and theories, makes it that far from being objective, i.e., encouraging healthy competitions that will bring about developments in society, authors and narrators use some individuals to amplify their intended stories about their protagonists. They often exaggerate the character they wish to project in a positive light and underestimate the character they wish to undermine. A further implication for society is that a certain chasm is created in the

social and moral fabric of the people. Individuals would engage in all sorts of things that are not legit just for mere recognition.

At the heart of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, lies an effort to designate human values. Achebe's designation of values moves from Okonkwo through Unoka to other characters, to whom he assigns one or more values, as the case may be. However, a closer gaze will reveal that Achebe's value label, as exhibited in the literary world he created, seemed opinionated and dogmatic about natural human qualities and endowments. His idea of fulfilment, strength, bravery, and manliness revolved around Okonkwo, whom he projected as a model, while laziness, failure, and cowardice revolved around Unoka, whom he prescriptively presented negatively.

One may ask, Was Okonkwo happy, successful, and strong in the face of all his life's vicissitudes? Was Okonkwo sadistic in his purported happiness? Were Okonkwo's presumed good actions, including his willingness to fight other communities, a product of ego or a desire to satisfy a common good? Put differently, were they egoistic or altruistic? Again, was Unoka a complete failure? Were there not instances, where he was successful, happy, and brave? Unoka was said to be afraid of blood and war; what moral implications does that have for the person of Unoka and his society in general? Should that affect his values? Does every man like blood and war, even in recent times? Is such a gesture immoral or amoral? Could such determine the fundamental end of an individual? Again, he is termed weak and lazy. Was he holistically a lazy man and a failure? What moral implications did his presumed laziness and failure hold for his society? In a more indicting manner, did Achebe intend to make a moral case with the portrait of Unoka, or are his readers and interpreters reading him wrongly? Are we having instances of such disapprobation of human values, qualities, and giftedness in our time? How far has our society benefited from such an unjustifiable designation of human values? All these and many more questions will inform and form both the locus and focus of this paper.

We can affirm from the foregoing, therefore, that *Things Fall Apart* is greatly occupied with various levels of appreciation of human values, and since the idea of human individual values occupies a central stage in such a master piece and in the present research, it therefore becomes imperative that we embrace principles and theories of Axiology in interrogating some seemingly obvious valuative preferences with which Achebe presents his narratives. As a branch of philosophy, axiology basically deals with values and valuations. It studies judgements about values in both ethics and aesthetics, which are its main branches. Suffice it to say that axiology carries out a rational autopsy on any claim or object of value.

### Concept of Axiology

The term 'axiology' is derived from Greek roots: *axios*, which means "worth" or "value," and *logos*, which means "logic" or "theory". Thus, axiology could be said to be either a theory of value or a logic of worth. As noted earlier, it is a branch of philosophy that deals with value or quality and studies judgements about values in both ethics and aesthetics, which are considered its two branches.<sup>i</sup>

Axiology may be a relatively new discipline since the term could be traced to Paul Lapie and E. von Hartmann in the twentieth century, however, the problems and issues that axiology investigates have been with us for ages. They have been there right from the moment man began to reflect upon the conditions of life, the structure of reality, the order of nature, and man's place in it.<sup>ii</sup> This could be punctuated by the fact that man is a being with a very high level of curiosity. He has been primarily interested in

how things and events administer to his basic and derivative needs. He has been concerned with how things satisfy or frustrate him and how to preserve and promote the good things of life. He also curtails and erases objects that stifle his zest for life.<sup>iii</sup> Again, valuative preferences are not treasures that human beings can dispense with. In fact, investigation into the claims, truth, and validity of value judgements is a necessity of life. The concept of value cuts across our lives at every point in time. It is a fact to state that we prefer one thing to another; we shift our attention from one event to another; we praise one behaviour and condemn another, we like and dislike. Whenever we do these, we value them.<sup>iv</sup>

Concerning this, Samuel L. Hart buttresses,

Behind our passions, interests, purposive actions, are the belief that they are worthwhile. We attach to them different degrees of importance or value. We speak about good and bad aims, noble and mean actions, beautiful and ugly objects, pious and impious intentions and deeds. Our whole life moves between attraction and repulsion. Events are alluring, enhancing, fascinating or repugnant, loathsome, and obnoxious. In fact, we not only value, but are always conscious of a scale of values, which scale rests with degree and quality of satisfactions.<sup>v</sup>

The emergence of axiology as a separate discipline is a major breakthrough within the philosophical circle. With it, philosophers no longer have the confusion of separating axiological issues from metaphysical and epistemological matters. Before now, there was intense and diversified thinking on values. Such thinking was loose and usually confined to particular values, be they ethical, aesthetic, or religious. However, Modern axiological investigations are concerned with streamlined issues and problems. They are concerned with the following questions:

What is the common nature of values? What is the status of values? Are they mere responses of man to a value-neutral nature or are they results of an ongoing interaction of reality and man? Is the scientific method of inquiry applicable to value judgments? What is the distinctive nature of value propositions? Are values relative to the social environment which sanctions certain valuations or do we have a standard of values which transcends given individual and social idiosyncrasies? Can there be a gain in knowledge of values? These and similar questions comprise the subject matter of axiology.<sup>vi</sup>

From the foregoing, we can maintain that axiology is the proper discipline to investigate values, or better yet, to respond to the questions that revolve around values. Such matters cannot be left to the empirical sciences. Those are concerned with bodily dimensions only. According to their principles of operation, they move from observations, to experiments, and then to the formulation of hypotheses. Thus, they can only account for what appeals to the senses, as many readers of Achebe have done. Nevertheless, value transcends the domain of the senses. Even what the senses cannot grasp can still have value. Hence, philosophy, which studies values in their entirety through some axiological methodological tools, is considered appropriate for such an investigation. Apart from carrying out a rational autopsy on any object of knowledge, philosophy is by its very nature flexible in embracing the methodological assumptions in other disciplines that it finds reasonable for its operations. Hence, it remains the mother of all sciences.

## Human Values

Very essential to the understanding of human values is the question, ‘Who is a human being?’ Yes. There may not be a universally acceptable answer to this question; the question remains valid as long as the investigation of human values and attributes is concerned. So, it is not to be taken for granted, nor should we neglect the possible answers that will come out of it. Otherwise, we will either arrive at a superficial understanding of the meaning of human values or a haphazard probing of Achebe’s negligence of the complex make-up of the human being, especially as it has to do with his designation of human values between Okonkwo and Unoka.

Human beings share some anatomical similarities and relatedness with great apes, yet they are distinguished by their more highly developed brains and a capacity for articulate speech and abstract reasoning.<sup>vii</sup> Again, the human being is the being that is referred to as *Homo sapiens*; *homo*, which means “being”, “man,” or “creature”; and *Sapeins*, which means “wise”. Thus, the human being is in this way referred to as a being that is wise or a creature that is wise.<sup>viii</sup> This shows that there is more to human beings than their bodily dimensions. This made Socrates engage in frequent reflection and self-questioning.<sup>ix</sup>

For Aristotle, the human being is a rational animal. Rationality is the crucial differentiating characteristic of human beings.<sup>x</sup> According to him, while searching for the end of human actions, it should not be looked for in the things he commonly shares with other creatures, such as nourishment and growth. In carrying out such a search, we should explore that which is special to human beings, which is the activity of the soul in accordance with reason.<sup>xi</sup> Such activity has to be carried out well, nobly, and in accordance with the appropriate virtue. Consequently, the human good becomes the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. If there are several virtues, it will be in accordance with the best and most complete.<sup>xii</sup>

In sum, the human attributes that are connected with only physique and emotion do not exhaust all human attributes. As such, human valuation should not be based on them, because they are superficial. Suffice it to say, as we shall see in this study, that human values are context-bound in that when we speak of strength, it has to be appropriated to mean either physical strength, emotional strength, or even intellectual strength.

## Concept of Designation

Designation could be understood as the action of choosing someone or something for a special purpose or giving it a special status. It could also be the act of choosing someone or something for a special job or stating that something has a particular character or purpose.<sup>xiii</sup> This implies that since designation is about choosing, then choice is involved. More so, we can only choose when there is an option. And when we choose “A” rather than “B” or “C”, we show some valuation. Thus, given that *Things Fall Apart* is purely fiction, Achebe could have chosen Unoka to be imbued with some positive qualities and Okonkwo to be imbued with those qualities and values he designated for Unoka. However, he chose to do it the way he wanted.

What we intend to achieve here is that it does not work automatically, as many infer from the literary world of *Things Fall Apart*, which makes them see the name ‘Unoka’ as disgusting and also makes the name Unoka go into extinction. No one still bears the name Unoka today because it is conceived as being synonymous with failure. Such a

society that treats Unoka with such disposition also fails to understand that there could be many who go by the name Okonkwo who are weak, lazy, and failures if viewed through the lens of Achebe's Okonkwo. Nonetheless, we shall not stop to indicate that the idea of designation is purely about choosing who becomes what through a particular lens or context.

### **Achebe's Designation of Human Values**

The following questions will help us underscore how Achebe understands and projects the uniqueness and giftedness of his characters: How does he understand concepts such as strength, weakness, success, failure, courage, cowardice, etc.? Does he situate them within the sensual qualities alone? Achebe stated clearly his notions of strength and weakness through the distinction he draws between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka. This started at the onset of his novel and is sustained through the end of both characters. For Achebe, Okonkwo's fame rested on solid personal achievements. While he was still young, he brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat, who was a champion wrestler for seven years. He was called the Cat, because his back would never touch the earth.<sup>xiv</sup> Nevertheless, Okonkwo won him and his fame grew like a bushfire in the harmattan.<sup>xv</sup>

During the planting season, Okonkwo also worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was very strong and rarely felt fatigue. This corroborates the fact that Achebe explicitly situates the idea of strength within the physical.<sup>xvi</sup> This could be the reason why Achebe indicates that Okonkwo never considered his wives and children, who were not as strong as he was. They suffered and dared not complain openly for fear of attracting his vengeance.<sup>xvii</sup> This made Nwoye to develop into a sad-faced youth.<sup>xviii</sup> The home was so hostile to his development and realisation of his uniqueness, so he embraced the white man's religion. Perhaps, Okonkwo wanted to create another version of himself in Nwoye. Could Okonkwo's action be termed an attempt to "recreate what God himself had created? Is there any other way to be strong? Or is strength entirely physical? If so, is every individual unique? How can one attain such uniqueness in a culture that is opinionated or dogmatic about the diversification of human qualities, especially when such qualities are contrary to what they already know? This could also explain why he was not patient with unsuccessful men, especially Unoka, his Father.

For Achebe, Unoka was a weakling. When Unoka had gone to consult the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves to find out why he always had a miserable harvest, Achebe, through the priestess Chika, affirms that Unoka had offended neither the gods nor his fathers. As a result, when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. However, Unoka was known in all the clan for the weakness of his machete and hoe, such that when his neighbours went out with their axes to cut down virgin forests, he planted his yams on exhausted farms that took no labour to clear. And while others crossed seven rivers to make their farms, he stayed at home and offered sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Thus, he was asked to go home and work like a man.<sup>xix</sup> This still presents the notion of strength and weakness from a sensual perspective.

On the notion of courage and cowardice, Achebe presents Okonkwo as a courageous man, because he was not afraid of war. He was a man of action. In Umuofia's latest war, Okonkwo was the first to bring home a human head. And that was his fifth human head, even though he was still young. He often used his first human head for palm wine during any great occasion, such as the funeral of any village celebrity.<sup>xx</sup> Okonkwo exhibited courage to the point that he considered gentleness to be





synonymous with cowardice and weakness. Thus, Achebe says that Okonkwo was ruled by one passion, namely, to hate everything that his father, Unoka, had loved. One of those qualities was gentleness, and another was idleness.<sup>xxi</sup> The questions are: is the human being a passion driven being more than he is a reason driven being? Again, were all the objects of Unoka's love and admiration bad or evil enough that Okonkwo could be exonerated for hating Unoka and everything he stood for? The answer to these questions remains the preoccupation of this study.

On the idea of success and failure, Achebe sees Okonkwo successful and Unoka as a failure. For Achebe, Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He had a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. While his own hut, or obi, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls, he also built huts for his three wives, which together formed a half moon behind the obi.<sup>xxii</sup> He had a very large yam barn, which had a long stack of yam in it. Okonkwo also had a shed for goats; and each of his wives built a small attachment to her hut for the hens.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Okonkwo always lost patience for anything that stood in his way of achieving his mission. He was afraid of failure and weakness. The fear of failure in him was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic; the fear of the forest; and the fear of the forces of nature, malevolent and red in tooth and claw.<sup>xxiv</sup> Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. Such fear lay deep within him.<sup>xxv</sup> It was his fear of himself. He was afraid that otherwise he would be found to resemble his father. He resented his father's failure and weakness as a little boy, and even now that he is older, he still remembered how he suffered when a playmate told him that his father was agbala.<sup>xxvi</sup>

On Unoka, Achebe says that he was lazy, improvident, and quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, which it seldom did, he quickly bought gourds of palm wine, called around his neighbours, and made merry.<sup>xxvii</sup> Unoka did so because whenever he saw a dead man's mouth, he saw the folly of not ending what one had in one's lifetime.<sup>xxviii</sup> Unoka was a debtor who always owed his neighbours some money, from a few cowries to quite considerable amounts. He was tall but very thin and had a slight stoop. He appeared very haggard and mournful, except when he was drinking or playing his flute.<sup>xxix</sup> He was poor, and his wife and children had barely enough to eat.<sup>xxx</sup> People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid it back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more and piling up his debts.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Based on the way Achebe associated Okonkwo with the positive sides and Unoka the negative sides of the qualities, one may ask, were there no instances where Unoka exhibited courage, strength, and success? For instance, even the ability to convince people to keep lending him money when they already said they would not should be recorded as a success. Such rhetoric, with the power of eloquence and conviction, could have been appreciated and appropriated. Such could be explored by a community for good purposes. This giftedness with hospitality helped him to pacify the emotion with which Okoye came to ask for his money.<sup>xxxii</sup>

The foregoing will obviously call our attention and reawaken our consciousness to some intricacies concerning the lives of Okonkwo, Unoka, and those around them. It reawakens the consciousness that, given the complexity of a human being, no one lens is enough to make a conclusive assertion about him. And in a more particular way, we can now have a rethink about any attempt to sell out the portraits of Okonkwo and Unoka without some level of appropriation.

## An Axiological Interpretation of Achebe's Story of Unoka and its Societal Implications

In order to subject the binocular perspective with which Achebe and his earlier readers have judged values to some axiological scrutiny, it is necessary to first underscore some thoughts on axiology. In his work, *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche, whose thoughts set the pace for what later became contemporary value theories, addresses the problem of values and valuation. Rather than support the positing of the liberal subject, he advocates the enhancement of man; not in improving the conditions of existence for the majority of human beings but in the generation of a few.<sup>xxxiii</sup> With this, Nietzsche anticipates axiology since he looks “forward to new philosophers who will be strong and original enough to revalue and reverse so-called ‘eternal values’.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Following Nietzsche's view, the question of what is value arises for Achebe. Some readers, who never see any need to interrogate Achebe, do so because Achebe wrote in a particular context. No doubt, to understand an author, the context within which they write should be considered. However, what happens, for instance, in Achebe's case, if an author is conditioned to accept only a few things as valuable? For instance, the people of Umuofia never celebrated the musical talent of Unoka, but other neighbouring villages did. In fact, they would ask Unoka's band and their dancing egwugwu to come and stay with them and teach them their tunes. They would go to such hosts for as long as three or four markets, making music and feasting.<sup>xxxv</sup> Thus, what the people of Umuofia never valued, other neighbouring villages valued. Little wonder Nietzsche claims that things do not have value in themselves. “If they are to have any value at all, it is only because human subjects give them value, and in so doing, they create value.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> Of course, we will not swallow Nietzsche's view without proper digestion since it leads to value subjectivism; however, we will not deny the fact that it takes a valuing subject to discover the value that a certain object carries.

Frantz Brentano did not embrace Nietzsche's view concerning value because of its subjectivist undertone. For Brentano, there is a distinction between judgements of truth and judgements of value. According to him, judgements of value are contingent upon the cognitive intuition, or right love, that grasps the rightness of an object. The thrust of his argument is that presentations are intrinsically valuable, because what is presented is always there. Error comes in while receiving what is presented, which is influenced by the phenomena of love and hate, i.e., emotions.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Thus, the reception could be positive or negative, depending on the mode of the receiver.

For Brentano, just as there could be positive or negative judgements, there could also be correct and incorrect emotions. An emotion is correct when one's feelings are adequate to their object, in the sense of being appropriate, suitable, or fitting.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Otherwise, it is incorrect.<sup>xxxix</sup> With this, Brentano eschews the subjectivist position with regards to pleasure and other values that are purely based on prejudices, instincts, or habits.<sup>xl</sup>

Achebe's story of Unoka and the way the story has been told over time by readers and interpreters, create a certain curiosity in the mind of anyone with some axiological orientation. The bigger challenge is that many, who have never read *Things Fall Apart*, place judgement on Unoka. And many who already have some biases about him go into reading the novel without bracketing the non-essentials (those biases and prejudices). This could be the reason why, till this day, the name “Unoka” is never on the list of names that any parent can give a new baby in Igbo land. Such a name has



been deeply tied to the personality of Unoka, whom Achebe painted as a weakling, a coward, and a failure; and whom society, beyond the literary world of Chinua Achebe, has interpreted in the same light.

Could such a valuative posture towards the characters in *Things Fall Apart* be a corroboration of the views of the thinkers like Christian von Ehrenfels, Alexius Meinong, R. B. Perry, and D. W. Prall. According to Ehrenfels, value is contingent on desire. He believes that we desire things not because we comprehend some ineffable quality or 'value' in them, but because we ascribe value to them because we desire them.<sup>xli</sup> Alexius Meinong, on the other hand, argues that value is contingent upon feeling. This is based on the referential meaning of our emotions, which includes judgements as a necessary presupposition of every value experience.<sup>xlii</sup> Further, R. B. Perry and D. W. Prall also argue that values are rooted in our conative and affective responses and that neither of them is an isolated psychological datum. They are the results of an ongoing transaction between ourselves and the various environments.<sup>xliii</sup> The foregoing may have created a pathway for value emotivists.

The axiological emotivists contend that values are based on one's feelings, desires, or emotional attitude. A. J. Ayer, who is a strong proponent of this view, opines that values add nothing to the factual content of a statement. Statements are an exhibition of a person's emotional disposition.<sup>xliv</sup> For him, value-terms such as good, bad, right, wrong, are meaningless as normative concepts; hence, the statements in which they appear are pseudo-propositions. His rejection of those terms is based on the ground of verifiability. Yes. We may not accept everything Ayer and other emotivists may have presented since the statements that contain their claims may not also be verifiable. However, a closer reading of *Things Fall Apart* and other commentaries would reveal some influence from emotions, feelings, or desires in their approaches, which, apart from expressing the state of their mind, also intend to make others believe the course they champion.

The foregoing helps us see the precarious nature of value judgements. Sometimes, what could be treated as invaluable is greatly limited by human desires, feelings, or affection towards such an object of value. Of course, Achebe's work is fictitious. As such, he created the characters and imbued them with some values. However, questions arise when the nature of interpretations and readings of such a masterpiece makes it look like Achebe has offered human society a manual, which has become an imperative in carrying out human value judgements.

If basic values, as asserted by Scheler, Hartmann, and some of the axiological Platonists, have an ideal being independent of our recognition of them, and if their being is as axiomatic as the being of logical norms of numbers, and if we can only intuit them by a higher feeling as ideal entities, then it follows that whether or not the readers and interpreters of Achebe admit it or not, there are many values of Unoka that are not explicitly projected on the pages of *Things Fall Apart*. And where those values were spoken of at all, they were used to amplify the character of either Okonkwo or others, but not Unoka. For instance, "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion, namely, to hate everything that his father, Unoka, had loved. One of those qualities was gentleness, and another, idleness."<sup>xlv</sup> Here, gentleness, which is a virtue, is presented in such a manner that one can consider it to have the same meaning as weakness. Thus, such a virtue possessed by Unoka is viewed from a negative angle.

Contrary to the way Achebe made us believe through Okonkwo that to display emotion was a sign of weakness and that the only thing worth demonstrating was strength,<sup>xlvi</sup> which plays down the emotional dimension of the human being, the



axiological naturalists maintain that there should be certain continuity among sensations, desires, emotions, and cognitions. All these are not to be treated as discrete units of experience. They are rooted in the wider context of reality because we continuously interact with objects, events, and people, and none of our psychic functions can be treated in isolation.<sup>xlvi</sup> Thus, one cannot explicitly state when sensations, desires, emotions, and cognition function without each other. The implication, therefore, is that Achebe's picture of Okonkwo as a strong man, part of which is that he does not show emotion publicly, begs the question.

Again, the idea of strength and courage keeps appearing almost everywhere in the novel. Wherever such qualities appear, they either qualify the character of Okonkwo directly or indirectly. However, since aesthetics is concerned with categories and equality of beauty, under which it examines what makes something beautiful, sublime, or disgusting, it becomes necessary that we cast some axiological gaze on the person of Okonkwo. The question is, how aesthetically satisfying is it that Okonkwo, whom Achebe presents as having the strength to conquer and win in all the wars and fights he engaged in, including defeating Amalinze (the cat), was unable to conquer the war of emotion that continually confronted him? His family never enjoyed peace. The wives and children lived in perpetual fear, and they never complained. Such an emotion made him violate the week of peace. He killed Ikemefuna for fear of being called a weakling. Finally, he committed suicide. What then is strength if one who wins physical battles is weak in emotional battles? What then is weakness if Unoka, who never won a 'physical fight', was able to pull through in all life's vicissitudes, and never take his life, even though his society pushed him so hard and Achebe finally condemned him to an evil forest?

Achebe seemed to have realised the aesthetic flaws in the purported irreconcilable qualities of Okonkwo and Unoka and went further to create other characters such as Okoye, Obierika, and Ezeudu. He imbued these characters with the good qualities he extracted from both Okonkwo and Unoka. For instance, Okoye was also a musician, like Unoka. He played on the *ogene*. But he was not a failure like Unoka. He had a large barn full of yams, and he had three wives. And now he was going to take the *Idemili* title, the third highest in the land. Okoye was a great talker, and he spoke for a long time.<sup>xlvi</sup> Ezeudu was a great and fearless warrior in his time and was accorded great respect by all the clan. He was also the one who advised Okonkwo against the killing of Ikemefuna: "That boy calls you father. Do not bear a hand in his death."<sup>xlix</sup> He condemned Okonkwo's act of breaking the peace of the sacred week.<sup>1</sup> Above all, he lived a long life. About this, Achebe states: "Whenever one of these ancient men appeared in the crowd to dance unsteadily the funeral steps of the tribe, younger men gave way and the tumult subsided."<sup>li</sup>

We can draw these lessons from the foregoing: First, Ezeudu's view of life, contradicts Okonkwo's perception that bravery is synonymous with not expressing emotions of happiness, not curtailing unnecessary anger, and not being afraid of blood. Second, Ezeudu's life further affirms that getting involved in the social life of a people is not a weakness; as such, it is not also an impediment to longevity. Thirdly, the life of Ezeudu is a pointer to the fact that the quest for success and titles should not make us inhuman. Consequently, owing to the foregoing and relying on what we know about dialectics, we can say that in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Unoka is the 'thesis', Okonkwo is the 'antithesis', and then Okoye and Ezeudu, in whose characters Achebe resolved the tension he created through Unoka and Okonkwo, are the synthesis. Thus, Okonkwo should no longer be considered the ideal male or a symbol of strength,



courage, and success; rather, Okoye and Ezeudu should be considered to be all three in this story.

Through the lens of ethics, we also found Achebe's condemnation of Unoka to the evil forest wanting. If the human being is a being with freedom to make a chain of choices, which constitutes a fundamental option that will eventually determine his fundamental end, and ethics is a normative science of human conduct that includes their choices, then it follows that no other discipline could have accounted for the reason behind the fundamental end of Unoka in the evil forest than ethics would. However, ethics will be silent since the reasons behind such condemnation have no material that could attract an ethical gaze. The point here is that such an end should not be the product of some obscure antecedents, nor should it be the product of some disjointed moral situations or from a clearly manifested amoral background. A fundamental end must necessarily flow from a fundamental option, just as a fundamental option is a product of a chain of previous choices.

Achebe's condemnation of Unoka is more of an emotional and cultural thing. Unoka was not a bad man. He borrowed and hardly paid, yet he had a good neighbourhood with friends and families. On the contrary, Okonkwo's many antecedents, ranging from his inability to manage his emotions, which resulted in the violation of the sacred week, to his impatience for the members of his household, an attempt to kill one of his wives, the killing of Ikemefuna, and finally, the killing of himself are all issues that are of interest to ethics. All those were choices that formed his fundamental option, which finally led to his fundamental end.

Again, Okonkwo seemed egoistic in his relationships with others. Conceivably, since Achebe himself says that his fame rested on solid personal achievements,<sup>lii</sup> he never sees any need to relate properly to others as a human being does. As such, even his effort to defend his people could be interpreted from an egoistic perspective, because he later made some threats to the people (children, wives, neighbours, and the entire village) whom he claimed to have defended. Thus, he may have desired personal aggrandisement or interest.<sup>liii</sup> Was his desire to be anything that the father, Unoka, was not, for the benefit of the community or for a personal interest?

### **Societal Implications**

The first implication of this paper is for academia, while the second is for our society. Concerning the first, this should be an encouragement for any researcher, especially any younger researcher who picks up any work to read, study, analyse, comment on, etc. Of course, to pick up any work written by another author to carry out any of the above-listed activities or similar activities is in itself an attempt to appreciate the giftedness of another, which helps to extend the frontier of knowledge. This is a commendable step, unlike some researchers, who may carry out some research on a particular author without touching any of their books that discuss the concept under study. Their interpretations of the author's views are heavily based on what others have said about them. Such researchers should know that every interpretation is a distortion in some way. The distortion could be either an exaggeration of the view of the author or an underestimation of the view of the author.

When we engage an author without any form of mediation and with more open-mindedness, a lot of insight is gained. No wonder Bernard Lonergan sees insight as what happens to an inquiring mind. For him, insights arise from questions, and questions have birthdates, parented by answers to previous generations of questions. Thus, insight is not an act of picturing but rather an act of understanding.<sup>liv</sup> When we



engage an author, we are not just limited by what others have said about them; we see ourselves understanding the situation in life that gave rise to the work. No thinker thinks in a vacuum, because every thought is a product of context. When we seek to understand the context of a thought, we also seek to understand the biases and prejudices of the author. Such curiosity takes us beyond an author's biases and prejudices and the face-value interpretations of texts. In doing so, we can help author's reach out to some new dimensions of insight that were not available to them at the time they were writing.

On the second implication, our society is increasingly saturated with works, discussions, attitudes, and patterns of life that purposefully or inadvertently point to the designation of human values. With such an approach, a system has been created in such a way that anything outside of it does not possess any value. The system also interprets human values or giftedness from the same (binocular) perspective that Achebe and others viewed them: success versus failure, bravery versus cowardice, or even strength versus laziness, etc. The tension that this creates is about, Who is who? Who is greater? Who has more influence than the other? And who is wealthier? Now, if our society sees success as synonymous with the acquisition of wealth, influence, and power, and if a lack of them means failure, then it can translate into all sorts of quests for money, influence, and power among our youths, as we already have them today. Therefore, the root cause of all sorts of quests for money, fame, power, etc. among our youths today is not mysterious; rather it could be an evolution of some unnecessary comparisons of human values and potentialities, as we have expounded in our study of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Our society is even more charged in this era of machines imbued with some level of intelligence. This has not only gifted us with some level of fluidity in transmission via social media, but it has also left us with a higher level of complexity in that an individual in the comfort of their home can circulate information that is capable of creating enmity between or among friends, communities, institutions, and societies. Social media is filled with all sorts of comparisons. Hardly can one read a page on social media without noticing an attempt to either directly or indirectly sever a relationship or cause chaos between people, parties, bodies, and even organisations that ordinarily do not belong to the same category or do not share the same values. Why should a university lecturer and a businessman, or a farmer and a Yahoo boy, be compared with regards to who is more successful? Success should mean different things to them.

Again, the designation of human values, valuation, or moral acceptability of actions is becoming a matter of the greater hype and fans that an individual gets from the people. Social media has also become a place where issues are judged and decisions are taken, not minding the veracity of their judgements. Nevertheless, the stance of this research remains that there is no one lens for viewing and assigning human values, because one who is weak in a particular context could be the strongest in another context, perhaps a more relevant context. Hence, the attempt to designate human values would be much more appreciated when they are contextually appropriated than when they are overly critical in uncritical situations.

### **Evaluation**

A study of this sort will definitely cause a paradigm shift. The principle of paradigm shift states that the old paradigm must be found wanting; second, the new paradigm, which is set to replace the old, must be able to do what the old paradigm is doing, finally, the new paradigm must be capable of handling the new things discovered that



the old paradigm could not handle. This paper, following the hermeneutic method, has underscored the limited nature of how Achebe used some terms and how his many readers keyed into such usage and never advanced them. For instance, concepts such as weakness, strength, courage, cowardice, success, and failure should not be understood unilaterally. The term “strength” is not limited to the physical alone. We also have emotional and intellectual strength. Such applies also to other terms. The weakness of Achebe’s perspective was the unilateral way he considered those terms.

It is also obvious from the foregoing that human values are more than meets the eye. They go beyond the senses. Otherwise, putting on only a scientific lens could have sufficed when valuing humans. However, since he is by his nature a complex being, it then follows that the best approach to studying something about a being that is rational, emotional, social, religious, and cultural will be an approach that is not limited. Hence, philosophy, which is the mother of all sciences and which is flexible in embracing the methodological assumptions of other disciplines, is considered the best approach. This explains why axiology, which is a branch of philosophy and a discipline that studies value holistically, is embraced as the best tool to be used in retelling the story of the character Unoka, who was a victim of underestimation and devaluation.

On face value, Achebe appeared to tell a one-sided story. On the one hand, the story was about a single man, Okonkwo, who, right from his younger days, has remained a prototype of manliness, greatness, hard work, bravery, and success; on the other hand, it was about another man, Unoka, who has been a weakling, coward, failure, and mediocre. This has been the story among some readers until some more critical readers started engaging with this great work. Even Achebe himself seemed not to have sustained the binocular perspective of the story. Initially, he assumed some omniscient position to assign the two main characters their values; however, at a point, he realised he could not move forward. He then created other characters like Okoye, Obierika, and Ezeudu, whom he imbued with the positive qualities of both Unoka and Okonkwo; thus making room for individuals who are balanced. We cannot attain balance when we are too emotional, social, or rational. Virtue must necessarily maintain a middle ground.

Concerning the societal implications of the work, young researchers should engage primary materials so as to unlock those inlets and outlets that other commentators may not have unlocked, so as not to be malnourished research-wise or suffer from some intellectual constipation. Again, in a society where the citizens hit up the polity through unnecessary comparisons, this paper recommends that we embrace a multidimensional form of valuation as a way out. Thus, instead of comparing actors, musicians, footballers, and intellectuals who are gifted differently, this study becomes a clarion call to always contextualise a person’s ability and value.

## **Conclusion**

With the very many data points that are available as far as the idea of the designation of human values is concerned, this study has carefully and patiently considered the relevant available materials on this subject. This brings about the richness of our study. And even though some of the commentators, through their designative postures, created more chasms between Unoka and Okonkwo, we also attempted to bridge the gap by highlighting the nuances of the reason why Achebe created Okoye, Obierika, and Ezeudu as prototypes of what a man should be in the ancient Igbo community. He is to have a balanced personality.



Above all, this study also shows that such bias is not just about the world of *Things Fall Apart*. It is still very prevalent in our society today. Thus, we recommended that rather than employing the dogmatic or binocular way people's stories were told in *Things Fall Apart*, a more open embrace should be directed to the differences in people's gifts. Only when we do this shall we realise that our society has solutions to everything we are passing through, and those solutions are lying latent, unexplored, in the giftedness of the most neglected people, areas, and places of our society.

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