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RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNEARTHING PARENTHOOD IN THE NIGERIAN CULTURE; THROUGH THE EXAMPLES OF THE PARENTAL FIGURES IN THE NOVEL 'THINGS FALL APART' BY CHINUA ACHEBE

Samaira Tomer

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Abstract

This essay aims to unearth parenthood in the Nigerian culture; through the examples of parental figures in the novel 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe. This paper will be citing various studies about Nigerian family structure, bonds and relationship; it will also be analysing various incidents throughout the course of the novel. The paper will also be discussing the short term and long term effects of parenting on a child. The paper will take a deeper look into the familial relationships in the Igbo society and the parenting style that they usually followed. It will outline the failure of parental figures in certain incidents with reference to the attachment theory. The paper will be analysing the relationship between Unoka and Okonkwo and its long term effect on Okonkwo, the relationship between Ikemefuna and Okonkwo and the relationship between Nwoye and Okonkwo. The paper will be discussing major events in these relationships and will compare it with the ideal style of parenting. To conclude, the paper would finally unearth parenthood in the Nigerian culture; through the examples of parental figures.

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Introduction:-

Parenting is the process of raising and educating a child from birth or before until adulthood. This implies that parenting is the process of taking care or supporting a child from birth to adulthood involving the physical, emotional, social and intellectual capabilities. Children are very important to Nigerian families because parents believe that their children will provide support for them in their old age. The Nigerian parenting style is referred to as the Authoritarian Parent. It is a style characterised by an approach of 'my way or the high way' and they are usually firm believers of the disciplinarian approach of parenting. Nigerian parents are also said to show a "tough love" approach towards their children. In Nigeria, children are regarded as very precious gifts from God, and therefore seen as a link to both the ancestors of the past and a means of group survival in the future. At the same time, they are also seen as a status symbol. For instance, the more children and wives a man has; the more reputable he would be.

All societies prescribe certain characteristics that their members are expected to possess and certain things people must not do, which are social looked down upon; if they are to function adequately as members of their society. Okonkwo was a man of great stature in the Igbo society, it could be said that he was the epitome of masculinity. He had 10 children and 3 wives. He had various titles in society and was well known across all the neighbouring villages. Okonkwo had a comparatively traumatic childhood and that instilled in him certain unhealthy qualities. Unoka was Okonkwo's father and he was somewhat of a disgrace to both his family and society. He had feminine qualities, which was also the cause for Okonkwo to resent his father for not meeting society's criteria for a man.

Unoka was a musician and hardly earned enough to provide for his family. He borrowed money from everyone and most of the times, he was unable to pay them back. Growing up in a household environment like that, Okonkwo must have been getting humiliated by his father and was not a healthy environment for a child to grow up in. It was also the fathers 'responsibility to lead by example and Unoka did not set a good example for his son.

A study says that: "Home environment of a place influences the extent to which values and culture are effectively communicated to the child. A child rearing approach that is not supported by the home environment may confuse the child, and result in an unsatisfactory outcome". Okonkwo had believed that his father had brought shame to their family and was often teased about his father's social standing. His peers often called his father 'Agbala' which meant a woman. At a young age, Okonkwo had decided to stray away from his father and to some extent he disowned his father. He started working and borrowed yam seeds from people, since he was not going to be inheriting anything from his father. He had become the sole provider for his family although; according to Igbo culture and tradition, "Children and dependants are expected to serve and remain under the mentorship of father and/or mother only on the condition that they know what they are doing and are not a bad influence on the children or dependants".

In the novel, Okonkwo had admitted that he had the fear of becoming like his father. That fear was perhaps his greatest. As an act to repress this fear, Okonkwo had done everything in his power to be the opposite of his father. This also made him overlook the good qualities that Unoka had possessed including his gentleness, kindness and calm nature. Okonkwo had soon become a product of society's expectation for an ideal man until he was overburdened and 'things fell apart'. I believe that this also made him a shell of a man because he had lost who he truly was and drowned in society's expectation for him due to the burden of his father.

In the Nigerian parenting style, mothers were seen as angels. They fed their children with words of affirmation and reassurance of love from their behalf. Fathers on the other hand, did not believe in showing emotions. They believed that their job was to provide for their families and had no time for a display of emotions. Okonkwo also believed that he had no time for a display of affections. He despised emotions because he had felt that they would make him look weak and question his masculinity.

Fathers train the boys in farm work, cutting the palm, staking yams and making barns. They also learn crafts such as blacksmithing, carpentry as a means of livelihood. Okonkwo had started doing this with his eldest son, Nwoye since a very young age. Although, Nwoye's body was not fully able to cope up with such strenuous work. Okonkwo had claimed that he had seen parts of his father Unoka in Nwoye and that scared Okonkwo. Okonkwo being a parent following the "Authoritarian" style of parenting, did not allow Nwoye to venture for himself. Nwoye had stated in the novel that he enjoyed listening to the stories that his mother used to tell him and did not really care much for the sowing of yams. Okonkwo automatically then labelled Nwoye as 'lazy' and frequently punished him for his disinterest.

According to Bowlby's theory of attachment: "When the attachment figure is sensitive to the child's needs and provides warm and loving care, the child's self-confidence to relate easily with others is maximally developed". To summarise, secure parent-child attachment bonds are formed when the care giver is confident, responsive, warm, affectionate, empathic, trustworthy, and consistent. Then the child grows up to be sensitive, warm, empathetic and establishes good relations with others. In contrast, when attachment bonds are characterised by insecurity, rejection, lack of warmth, inconsistency and abuse; the child will develop either avoidant or anxious, ambivalent style of attachment. The most ideal type of attachment would be secure attachment, which is not very common between Nigerian parents and their offsprings. Since in West African societies, children are taught at a very young age that they must do what is told without any explanation. Therefore, children usually form either the anxious, avoidant or disorganised attachment bonds with their caretakers. If we take the example of Okonkwo himself, we can categorise him under the avoidant attachment bond. This was the cause for him to be uncomfortable with deep feelings and set extreme emotional and physical boundaries. His childhood experience did not give him the motivation to establish a secure attachment bond with his children.

Okonkwo had a number of deep-rooted issues due to his childhood, this caused him to make a number of mistakes while parenting his own children. The biggest being; the killing of Ikemefuna. Ikemefuna was a boy from one of the neighbouring villages, he was given to Umofia as sacrifice. He was placed in Okonkwo's household and stayed there for two years. He had become like a son to Okonkwo. Ikemefuna had also become like a father/brother figure

to Nwoye as well. He had motivated Nwoye to do work such as sowing yam and he had become Nwoye's role model. The Oracle had ordered that Ikemefuna should be killed. Although various people had told Okonkwo to not play a role in his killing. He still went and killed the boy who called him father with his very own hands; all because he thought that the society would perceive him as weak. This was the point when Nwoye completely emotionally detached himself from his father. Following that, Nwoye soon disowned Okonkwo as his father and cut all of his ties with him. Nwoye also shunned all the values and parts of culture which Okonkwo had tried to force upon him; by covering to Christianity and changing his name.

Although Okonkwo had made many mistakes during his experience as parents; he had a clear soft spot for his daughter Ezinma. There was an incident where Ezinma had gotten sick and the Priestess had come to take her away to present her in front of the Agbala in the hills. Both Ekwefi and Okonkwo showed a complete disregard of what the Priestess said and defied her wishes and followed her up to the hills. This was a great show of affection and showed the great lengths that parents were willing to go for their children. This made it evident that Okonkwo did actually have great love for his children although he didn't always show it. Ekwefi also had great love for her daughter Ezinma and spoiled her beyond bonds and treated her like how parents usually treat their male child.

The Igbo society, as a whole had normalised certain things pertaining to parenthood. For instance, the fact that whenever a set of twins were born; they were killed. No parent would want to kill their child or allow them to be killed. The Igbo society had also normalised wife beating and that would not be healthy for the child living in the house to witness. That would promote violence and would also cause some pent up anger towards their parents because their mothers would be getting beaten up. This would also give children the impression that such an act is normal and should be practiced.

To conclude, the Nigerian parenting style does not necessarily like showing emotions and love. It is evident that the parents do love their children but they don't show it well. At the same time, love is not the only thing required to attain an ideal parent-child relationship. The socio-economic factors are of great importance as well. Failure in carrying out the traditional Nigerian parenting style, has also led to a cycle of failure in reference to the parents; predominantly fathers. It can also be seen that in the novel, there have been two instances where the child has disowned their families. However, traditionally the opposite happens. Nigerian parents are like Indian parents in many ways. Nigerian parents should look into having a secure attachment bond with their children. Okonkwo, along with numerous Nigerian parents; did not realise the importance of emotions and mental health. Tradition superseded love and emotions in this case. This could also be a reason for Okonkwo's untimely demise.

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