



# FILIAL AND PATERNAL OBLIGATIONS IN *THINGS FALL APART* BY CHINUA ACHEBE

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## ABSTRACT

In African traditional societies, the responsibilities of children and parents are strongly influenced by cultural and communal values, which are essential for maintaining family unity and societal cohesion. However, modern challenges have arisen, prompting adaptations in how these duties are fulfilled, demonstrating the adaptability of these customs in response to evolving conditions. Colonial rule imposed significant disruptions on established social norms and family structures, resulting in notable shifts in familial dynamics. This paper explores the complex link between filial and paternal relationships within African traditional societies, highlighting their cultural and social importance, as well as examining the effects of external influences. The paper employs reader response theory, and descriptive research design. Through a detailed textual analysis and thematic analysis, the findings indicate that filial responsibilities are portrayed as extremely important, with children being anticipated to show respect and follow their parents' directives while also offering them care and assistance. Moreover, they are required to comply with and yield to their parents' authority. The paternal role, involving guidance, discipline, and serving as the primary authority within the family and broader society, was observed to be of utmost importance. The study therefore concludes that there is profound impact of historical and socio-cultural factors on family dynamics. The study therefore recommends inter-generational dialogue and reconciliation efforts within communities to enhance filial and paternal relations.

Keywords: Filial, Paternal, Obligations, Responsibility, Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe,

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In African traditional societies, honoring filial obligations holds immense cultural importance. Wilentz (1992) observes that filial obligations in traditional societies are deeply rooted in cultural and communal values, forming the backbone of family structures and societal harmony. In these societies, family is regarded as the fundamental unit of social organization, and filial duties are considered essential for maintaining familial cohesion, respecting ancestors, and upholding community values. This respect extends to the preservation of lineage, where maintaining family traditions and ensuring the family name continues for generations are paramount. These practices are not just personal responsibilities but are integral to the social fabric, reinforcing the values of respect, unity, and continuity within the community.

According to Sangree (1974), a crucial part of fulfilling filial duties in African traditional societies involves maintaining a spiritual connection with ancestors. Ancestral veneration holds deep significance, with ceremonies and rituals conducted to honor deceased family members. Engaging in these rituals is considered vital for upholding spiritual equilibrium, safeguarding the family's well-being and prosperity. This practice highlights the interconnectedness between the living and the deceased, stressing the importance of maintaining harmony and continuity across generations. In African communities, fulfilling filial responsibilities extends beyond personal matters; it significantly influences one's social status (Ayisi, 1992). Individuals who conscientiously care for their parents and show respect to their elders are esteemed within the community. Such actions reflect a sense of duty and honesty, elevating an individual's reputation. Furthermore, when everyone fulfills their filial duties, it fosters unity and collaboration, contributing to overall community cohesion.

While these filial obligations are deeply rooted, contemporary challenges have emerged. Urbanization, globalization, and changing societal values have led to shifting family dynamics. Migration and economic transformations sometimes disrupt traditional support systems. However, African societies have shown resilience, adapting these obligations to modern contexts. While the fundamental values remain, Ahlin and Sen (2020) posit that the methods of fulfilling filial duties have evolved, showcasing the flexibility of these customs in the face of changing circumstances. Similarly, paternal roles in African traditional

societies are deeply ingrained in cultural values, highlighting the essential role of fathers within the family unit. Fathers are esteemed as providers, guardians, and leaders, bearing the responsibility of imparting cultural and ethical principles to their offspring, thus upholding ancestral traditions. Within this framework, paternal roles represent constancy, guidance, and the embodiment of sagacity within both the family and the broader community (Samuels, 2016).

Traditionally, fathers are the principal providers for their families' economic welfare. Their duties encompass ensuring the family's material prosperity, encompassing the provision of sustenance, housing, and education for their children. Moreover, fathers serve as protectors, shielding their households from external perils and adversities (Patterson, 2002). This dual function of provider and guardian underscores the pivotal role of fathers in guaranteeing the safety and well-being of their families.

Fathers are entrusted with the responsibility of instilling moral and ethical values in their children (Marks & Dollahite, 2001). They serve as role models, teaching their sons about responsibility, integrity, and respect, while guiding their daughters on self-worth and dignity. Paternal guidance is essential for shaping the character of the younger generation, fostering a sense of discipline and moral integrity within the family unit. While paternal roles are sometimes associated with authority, fathers also play a significant role in nurturing emotional bonds within the family (Parke & Cookston, 2019). They provide emotional support, encouragement, and love to their children, fostering a sense of security and belonging. The emotional connection between fathers and their children is a fundamental aspect of paternal roles, contributing to the overall emotional well-being of family members. In upholding these traditions, communities preserve their identity and reinforce the importance of family bonds, ensuring the transmission of cherished values to future generations. Thus, the filial and paternal relationships in African societies stand as pillars of communal strength, embodying the fundamental principles of respect, love, and togetherness that define these vibrant cultures.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by reader response theory by Louise Rosenblatt (1993). The theory is concerned with dynamic interaction between the reader and the text, emphasizing the reader's subjective experience and interpretation. Originating from Louise Rosenblatt's groundbreaking work, this theory underscores the notion that a literary work's meaning is not fixed within the text but emerges through the reader's engagement. This interactive process, as described by Rosenblatt, is influenced by various factors, including the reader's background, emotions, cultural context, and the specific circumstances under which the reading takes place. The act of reading is viewed as a collaborative endeavor between the text and the reader. The reader brings their unique perspectives, beliefs, and experiences to the literary work, actively participating in the construction of meaning. Rosenblatt's approach emphasizes that a text's significance is not predetermined; instead, it is a product of the interplay between the words on the page and the reader's response. This approach challenges the traditional notion of a fixed, objective meaning residing solely within the text, suggesting that interpretations are subjective and contingent on individual readers.

Reader Response Theory, as applied in this study, recognizes that each reader may derive distinct meanings from the same text. It acknowledges the diversity of reader experiences and perspectives, thereby enriching the understanding of filial and paternal relationships as depicted in "Things Fall Apart." By considering the readers' responses, beliefs, and emotions, the study can explore how different readers perceive and interpret the filial and paternal themes within the novel. Employing reader response theory facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexities revolving filial and paternal obligations as depicted in "Things Fall Apart." By examining readers' responses to the familial dynamics portrayed in the text, researchers can uncover the nuances of these relationships and the underlying cultural and societal norms that influence them. Reader response analysis also allows for an exploration of how readers' own experiences and cultural backgrounds intersect with their interpretations of filial and paternal obligations in the novel, enriching our understanding of the text's broader socio-cultural significance.

## 3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The researcher employed descriptive research design to gather and analyze qualitative data for the purpose of achieving the set objectives of the study. Kim, Sefcik & Bradway (2017) define descriptive research design as a systematic method of investigation used to describe and analyze the characteristics, behaviors, or phenomena being studied. In the exploration of filial and paternal relationships in Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," a descriptive research design involved a detailed and comprehensive analysis of these relationships as portrayed in the novel. The study targeted all the literary works done by Chinua Achebe, from which purposive sampling was used to select the text under study. Through document analysis, the researcher scrutinized the novel's content, focusing on specific passages, character interactions, and thematic elements related to filial and paternal relationships. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, focusing on specific passages, character interactions, and thematic elements related to filial and paternal relationships.

## 4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Chuang, Mancini and Roberto (2009) argue that the dynamics of filial and paternal roles evolve over time in response to societal changes, cultural shifts, and external influences. As societies undergo transformations such as urbanization, globalization, or, as in the case of "Things Fall Apart," colonialism, the roles and expectations placed on parents and children may undergo significant alterations.

In Things Fall Apart, the depiction of filial and paternal roles is deeply intertwined with the cultural fabric of the Igbo society in pre-colonial Nigeria. Within this setting, filial obligations are paramount, with children expected to honor and obey their parents while also caring for them in their old age. Conversely, paternal roles are characterized by the authority and responsibility held by fathers, such as Okonkwo, in providing for and guiding their families. However, Achebe's narrative also explores the complexities and tensions inherent within these roles, particularly through the strained relationship between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. As the story unfolds against the backdrop of colonialism, the intrusion of external forces disrupts traditional familial dynamics, challenging established norms and reshaping the roles of parents and children. This dynamic interplay between filial and paternal roles not only serves as a microcosm of Igbo society but also reflects broader themes of cultural identity, resistance, and adaptation in the face of colonial oppression.

#### 4.1 Filial Roles

Okonkwo feels a deep and serious obligation to provide to his family even his ungrateful father.

“...Okonkwo, who had been walking about aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly found an outlet. “Who killed this banana tree?” he asked...”

As depicted in this scenario, Okonkwo's actions toward his second wife underscore his sense of obligation towards providing for his family, even at the expense of his own emotional restraint. Okonkwo's reaction to the cutting of the banana tree exemplifies his deeply ingrained belief in the importance of maintaining resources for sustenance within his household. Despite his wife's explanation that she had only taken a few leaves for practical purposes, Okonkwo's immediate response is one of anger and physical punishment. This reaction stems from his strict adherence to traditional roles and expectations of providing for his family, a duty he takes very seriously. This illustration illuminates Okonkwo's unwavering commitment to fulfilling his filial duties, even if it means resorting to drastic measures to maintain the perceived integrity of his family's resources. As idealized by Wicclair (1990), in many cultures, fulfilling filial obligations is considered a moral imperative and a demonstration of gratitude for the sacrifices made by parents in raising their children. As such, children may go to great lengths to ensure the well-being and happiness of their parents, whether through financial support, emotional assistance, or physical care. This can involve making personal sacrifices, such as putting aside one's own aspirations or desires, in order to prioritize the needs of their parents.

Nwoye struggles to meet Okonkwo's expectations leading to a strained relationship between father and son. Okonkwo, as the father figure, expects his son to embody masculine traits, like strength and violence, which are highly valued in their society. He tries to instill these values in Nwoye by telling him stories of warfare and bloodshed, hoping to mold him into a strong and assertive man. However, despite Okonkwo's efforts, Nwoye feels conflicted. He knows he should conform to his father's expectations and embrace masculinity, but he finds himself drawn to the gentle, nurturing stories told by his mother. This conflict between his father's expectations and his own preferences creates tension and difficulty for Nwoye in fulfilling his filial role as a son. Nwoye's struggle highlights the complexity of filial roles within the Igbo society portrayed in the novel. While there's a clear expectation for children to obey and conform to their parents' wishes, Nwoye's divergence from his father's expectations illustrates the challenges that can arise when those expectations clash with an individual's own identity and desires. Ivanhoe (2004) argues that in certain societies, filial piety holds significant cultural and moral importance, emphasizing utmost respect and obedience towards parents. This emphasis on filial duty often extends to fulfilling parental expectations without question, prioritizing family harmony and cohesion. Conversely, in more modern or westernized societies, there tends to be greater room for negotiation and autonomy within parent-child relationships. However, irrespective of cultural context, the tension between meeting parental expectations and asserting one's individuality remains a prevalent theme in discussions of filial roles.

In Okonkwo's household, the children, like Nwoye and his siblings, play an important role in helping with daily chores. This is seen when Ezinma, one of the daughters, helps her mother, Ekwefi. She carries hot coals to Nwoye's mother to aid in cooking.

“...Ekwefi put a few live coals into a piece of broken pot and Ezinma carried it across the clean swept compound to Nwoye's mother...Ezinma went outside and brought some sticks from a huge bundle of firewood. She broke them into little pieces across the sole of her foot and began to build a fire, blowing it with her breath...Ezinma ran in the direction of the barn and brought back two yams from the dwarf wall...”

The above excerpt shows that children in the household are expected to assist in tasks that contribute to the well-being of the family. Additionally, Ezinma gathers sticks for firewood and builds a fire herself, demonstrating her responsibility and willingness to contribute to the household chores. This highlights the filial duty of the children to support their parents and participate in the everyday tasks necessary for the family's survival and comfort.

Additionally, Enzima, Okonkwo's daughter, exhibits filial responsibility by caring for her parents, especially her father, during time of illness. As observed by Stuijbergen and Van Delden (2011), filial responsibility means taking care of one's parents, especially when they are in need. When Okonkwo falls ill and becomes too weak to even walk properly, Enzima steps in to help. She notices that her father hasn't eaten for two days, showing her concern for his well-being. Enzima not only brings food to him but also encourages him to eat by reminding him of the importance of nourishment. She sits beside him, showing her support and care as she watches him eat. This demonstrates Enzima's commitment to fulfilling her duty as a daughter by taking care of her father during his time of illness.

Flashbacks to Okonkwo's relationship with elderly provide insights into the intergenerational dynamics and expectations within the family structure. Okonkwo, the protagonist, displaying the traditional filial role expected of him towards an elder, Nwakibie. Through the offering of kola nut and palm wine, Okonkwo not only shows respect but also acknowledges Nwakibie's status as a father figure within the community. By referring to Nwakibie as "Our father" and addressing him with the term "Nna ayi," Okonkwo emphasizes the importance of honoring elders and maintaining familial bonds. This act reflects the cultural values of the Igbo society, where respect for elders is deeply ingrained and filial piety is considered a fundamental aspect of social harmony. Moreover, this interaction highlights the intergenerational dynamics and expectations within the family structure. Okonkwo's gesture of respect towards Nwakibie not only demonstrates his adherence to tradition but also hints at the reciprocal nature of filial roles. By honoring the elderly, Okonkwo seeks to pave the way for his own greatness, as he believes that showing reverence to those who hold authority and wisdom will bring blessings and prosperity to his own life.

#### 4.2 Paternal Roles

Through their presence and involvement, fathers help instill confidence, resilience, and a sense of responsibility in their children. Additionally, Schofield and Beek (2005) observe that paternal figures offer stability and security within the family unit, fostering

a nurturing environment for children to thrive. Their influence extends beyond the household, impacting how children interact with the broader society. Overall, paternal roles are instrumental in laying the foundation for children's success and well-being. Fathers have a responsibility of nurturing their children to great men and women. Okonkwo wanted his son to be a great farmer and a great man.

"...Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the difficult art of preparing seed-yams. But he thought that one could not begin too early..."

Okonkwo takes on what he sees as his responsibility to mold his son into a "great man." He believes that part of being a great man is being a skilled farmer, able to provide for his family with the produce of his own hands. This belief reflects the societal values of Okonkwo's Igbo culture, where agriculture and self-sufficiency are highly esteemed. Okonkwo's desire for his son to be a successful farmer is not just about economic prosperity but also about instilling values of hard work, perseverance, and masculinity, as symbolized by the importance of yams in their culture. However, Okonkwo's approach to fulfilling this responsibility is somewhat harsh, as he is already seeing what he perceives as signs of laziness in his son and is determined to stamp them out, suggesting a rigid adherence to traditional gender roles and a lack of understanding or acceptance of individual differences and potentials.

Okonkwo wants his son Nwoye to be strong and tough like him. Okonkwo believes that being strong and masculine is very important for a man. He works very hard on his farms and expects his family to do the same. However, Nwoye, who is only twelve years old, doesn't seem as strong or hardworking as his father wants him to be. This worries Okonkwo, and he becomes angry and tries to make Nwoye tougher by constantly scolding and hitting him. Okonkwo believes that this is the right way to teach Nwoye to be a strong man. Okonkwo's actions towards Nwoye demonstrate a traditional view of paternal roles where the father expects his son to conform to certain standards of behavior and masculinity.

Okonkwo takes on a paternal role toward Ikemefuna, a hostage from another village, trying to mold him into a worthy member of society. Okonkwo is tasked by the elders of the clan to look after Ikemefuna, with the intention of integrating him into their society. Initially, Ikemefuna is fearful and attempts to escape, but he soon realizes he has nowhere to go. Okonkwo's response to Ikemefuna's fear is stern and authoritative, as he enters the hut with a big stick and stands over the boy until he finishes his food. Despite this intimidating behavior, Okonkwo begins to develop a genuine fondness for Ikemefuna, though he keeps these feelings hidden. This illustration highlights the complexity of paternal roles within the society depicted in the novel. Okonkwo's actions towards Ikemefuna demonstrate both the responsibility he feels towards the boy's upbringing and the harshness ingrained in his character. While he initially approaches his paternal duties with a sense of duty and discipline, Okonkwo's growing affection for Ikemefuna reveals a softer side to his character.

Sarwar (2016) discuss this concept within the framework of parenting styles, particularly authoritarian parenting. Authoritarian parenting is characterized by high levels of control and strict discipline, with an emphasis on obedience and conformity to rules. Within this style, fathers may assume a dominant role in enforcing rules and expectations within the family. Despite the strictness associated with authoritarian parenting, scholars emphasize that it is not devoid of affection towards children (Becker, 1964). Fathers practicing authoritarian parenting may display affection for their children in various ways, such as providing for their basic needs, offering guidance, and showing pride in their achievements.

Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, expresses concern for Okonkwo's family during Okonkwo's exile, demonstrating the interconnectedness of families within the community.

"..You worry yourself for nothing," said Obierika. "The children are still very young..." "Nwoye is old enough to impregnate a woman. At his age I was already fending for myself," said Okonkwo. "No, my friend, he is not too young," said Obierika. "A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him..."

Obierika expresses concern for Okonkwo's family, particularly his son Nwoye, during Okonkwo's exile. He reassures Okonkwo that the children are still young and need not worry excessively. However, Okonkwo, driven by his own experiences and expectations of manhood, dismisses Obierika's concern, highlighting his belief that Nwoye should already be self-sufficient at his age. This difference in perspective reflects contrasting ideas of masculinity and parental responsibility within the community. Obierika's understanding of familial interconnectedness emphasizes the importance of patience and guidance in nurturing children into adulthood. He acknowledges the unique qualities of each individual within the family unit and recognizes that Nwoye's development may require more time and understanding. Okonkwo's rigid adherence to traditional gender roles and expectations blinds him to the nuances of his son's character, ultimately hindering their relationship. This exchange illustrates the complexities of paternal roles and the impact of societal norms on family dynamics, prompting readers to consider the balance between individual identity and communal responsibility in shaping familial bonds.

Okonkwo's interaction with his daughter Ezinma reveal a softer side of him and his concern for her well-being.

"...Ezinma is dying," came her voice, and all the tragedy and sorrow of her life were packed in those words. Okonkwo sprang from his bed, pushed back the bolt on his door and ran into Ekwefi's hut. Ezinma lay shivering on a mat beside a huge fire... Okonkwo as took his machete and went into the bush to collect the leaves and grasses and barks of trees that went into making the medicine for iba..."

When he hears that Ezinma is ill and potentially dying, his reaction is immediate and filled with concern. He doesn't hesitate to rush to her side, pushing back the bolt on his door and running to Ekwefi's hut where Ezinma is lying. This swift action demonstrates Okonkwo's deep love and care for his daughter, despite his usually harsh exterior. His willingness to do whatever it takes to help her, such as collecting medicinal plants, shows his commitment to her well-being.

Ezeudu's interaction with Okonkwo portrays a significant example of paternal guidance and advice. As the oldest man in Umuofia, Ezeudu holds a position of authority and wisdom within the community, akin to that of a father figure. When he pulls Okonkwo aside to speak privately, it underscores a sense of care and concern for Okonkwo's well-being, as well as that of Ikemefuna, whom Okonkwo has come to regard as a son. The portrayal of paternal roles reflects a fundamental aspect of human relationships across various cultural contexts (Kagitibasi, 2014). Such paternal figures, whether biological fathers or elder mentors, often serve as

sources of guidance and support, offering advice and wisdom to navigate life's challenges. Their actions are driven by a deep sense of care and responsibility for those under their care, prioritizing their well-being above societal norms or personal interests. This archetype of paternal guidance underscores the importance of familial bonds and the role of mentorship in nurturing individuals' growth and development. Whether in literature, folklore, or real-life experiences, these paternal figures exemplify virtues that transcend cultural boundaries, emphasizing the universal significance of compassion, wisdom, and protection within paternal roles (Freedman, 1991).

Okonkwo, the father figure, asserts his authority and responsibility within the household by disciplining his son, Nwoye.

"...Do you think you are cutting up yams for cooking?" he asked Nwoye. "If you split another yam of this size, I shall break your jaw. You think you are still a child..." "I will not have a son who cannot hold up his head in the gathering of the clan. I would sooner strangle him with my own hands..."

He sternly warns Nwoye against cutting yams improperly, emphasizing the importance of responsibility and maturity. Okonkwo's words and actions reflect the traditional paternal role in Igbo society, where fathers are expected to maintain discipline and uphold cultural values within the family. By threatening to physically harm Nwoye for his perceived childish behavior, Okonkwo underscores the significance of obedience and respect for authority in the household.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION

In "Things Fall Apart," the portrayal of filial and paternal relationships highlights their significant importance within Igbo society. These relationships are not fixed but adapt as society changes. However, their core value remains strong, holding together the fabric of society and defining its identity. Through characters like Okonkwo and his son Nwoye, the novel shows how children are expected to follow tradition and meet family responsibilities. This reflects the deeply rooted beliefs in respecting parents and upholding family values.

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