



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE CONCEPTION OF HEROISM AND HEROES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS: THINGS FALL APART AND ARROW OF GOD: FROM CHALLENGES TO THE FATE OF HEROES

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#### ABSTRACT

Le destin des héros dans les romans de Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* et *Arrow of God*, est marqué par la tragédie, reflétant les transformations culturelles et les bouleversements coloniaux. Okonkwo, protagoniste de *Things Fall Apart*, incarne l'archétype du héros igbo, symbole de force, de résilience et de tradition. Cependant, son incapacité à s'adapter aux changements sociétaux imposés par le colonialisme européen conduit à sa chute tragique et à son suicide. De même, Ezeulu, prêtre en chef dans *Arrow of God*, est confronté à un sort similaire en luttant contre les attentes de sa communauté et les forces coloniales. Son obstination et sa tentative d'affirmer son autorité l'isolent de son peuple, entraînant la perte de son influence spirituelle et de sa pertinence sociale. Achebe présente ces héros comme le reflet d'un conflit plus large entre tradition et modernité, mettant en lumière les conséquences dévastatrices de la rigidité et de la résistance au changement. Alors qu'Okonkwo reste ancré dans le passé, Ezeulu adopte une approche plus nuancée en envoyant son fils à l'école occidentale, mais ses choix engendrent un chaos imprévu. À travers leurs récits, Achebe illustre l'interaction complexe entre l'agencéité individuelle, l'identité collective et les transformations historiques. Les destins de ces personnages sont des avertissements, soulignant la nécessité d'adaptation face aux bouleversements culturels et les implications plus larges de l'intrusion coloniale dans les sociétés africaines.

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of heroism and the fate of heroes occupy a central place in Chinua Achebe's novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), which explore the dynamics of Igbo society in pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria. These novels serve as literary studies of cultural transformation, heroism, and identity, capturing the tension between tradition and the encroaching forces of colonialism. This article examines the conception of heroism as represented through Achebe's protagonists, Okonkwo (*Things Fall Apart*) and Ezeulu (*Arrow of God*), investigating their struggles, challenges, and eventual fates as heroes within their communities. The study aims to unravel Achebe's portrayal of heroism and its implications for the survival of Igbo culture amidst external pressures. Specifically, this analysis seeks to understand the traits that define Achebe's heroes, their roles within their respective societies, and the societal conditions that contribute to their rise and fall. Central to this inquiry is the comparative exploration of how heroism is shaped by the shifting contexts of pre-colonial and colonial Igbo society, as reflected in the two novels. Scholarly reviews have extensively debated Achebe's characterization of heroes and his nuanced portrayal of Igbo society. Scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986)

emphasize Achebe's role in reclaiming African identity through literature, noting that his protagonists often symbolize the cultural struggles of their people. In contrast, critics like Simon Gikandi (1991) highlight the ambivalence in Achebe's depiction of heroism, where personal flaws and societal pressures intertwine to shape the trajectory of his characters. This study builds upon such literary discussions by focusing on the interplay between individual heroism and collective identity in Achebe's works. Additionally, the research contributes to ongoing debates about the role of literature in addressing postcolonial realities and preserving cultural heritage. To achieve these objectives, the research employs a comparative methodology, analyzing the societal conditions and the character arcs of the protagonists. By juxtaposing the challenges faced by Okonkwo and Ezeulu, the article delves into the interplay between heroism and societal change, tracing how each protagonist's personality, decisions, and ultimate fate mirror the cultural and historical transformations within their respective communities. This approach highlights the nuanced ways Achebe critiques colonial disruption while offering a broader reflection on the complexities of leadership, identity, and resilience in times of crisis. The theoretical framework of this study draws on postcolonial theory and archetypal criticism to investigate the notion of heroism.

Postcolonial theory contextualizes the characters' struggles within the broader narrative of colonial hegemony, while archetypal criticism provides insights into the universal patterns of heroism embedded in Achebe's narratives. This dual approach allows for a layered understanding of how Achebe constructs his heroes not only as products of their cultural milieu but also as representations of broader human conflicts. Achebe's heroes embody the dualities of strength and vulnerability, agency and limitation, tradition and change. Okonkwo, in *Things Fall Apart*, is portrayed as a tragic hero whose unyielding adherence to traditional values leads to his downfall, raising questions about the sustainability of rigid cultural ideals in the face of change. Similarly, in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu navigates the complexities of leadership within a fracturing society, grappling with the tension between his spiritual authority and the encroaching influence of colonial administration. Both characters reflect Achebe's exploration of the costs and contradictions of heroism, particularly in societies undergoing profound upheaval. This analysis also considers Achebe's broader literary contributions, situating his exploration of heroism within the context of African cultural and historical narratives. By critically engaging with his storytelling techniques, thematic concerns, and character development, the study seeks to shed light on Achebe's philosophical engagement with heroism and its implications for contemporary discussions on leadership, identity, and cultural preservation. Ultimately, this article argues that Achebe's novels challenge conventional definitions of heroism by revealing its multifaceted nature and its entanglement with the social, cultural, and political realities of the Igbo people during a period of profound transformation.

**Heroism in Chinua Achebe's Novels: A Comparative Analysis:** Chinua Achebe's conception of heroism, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, offers a perspective that diverges significantly from the traditional European notion of the hero. Achebe's heroes—Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*—are deeply rooted in Igbo cultural traditions, embodying values tied to their roles within their communities rather than the individualistic triumphs often celebrated in Western literature. In Igbo society, heroism is a social construct, reflecting an individual's ability to contribute meaningfully to their community and uphold its cultural values. Okonkwo and Ezeulu gain their status as heroes through their actions and adherence to these traditions. For instance, Okonkwo's journey from humble beginnings to becoming a titled man exemplifies the Igbo ideal that heroism is earned through hard work, courage, and resilience (Achebe, 1958). His victory over Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match symbolizes his strength and ambition, traits celebrated within his community. Similarly, Ezeulu's heroism lies in his spiritual authority and unwavering dedication to the customs and religious beliefs of Umuaro. As the chief priest of Ulu, he acts as a custodian of tradition, maintaining the spiritual balance of his society. However, Ezeulu's rigid adherence to these beliefs, even in the face of colonial impositions, demonstrates the complexities and vulnerabilities of his heroism (Achebe, 1964). European heroes, as seen in classical mythology and literature, often possess extraordinary abilities, such as divine parentage or superhuman strength. Figures like Achilles or Hercules epitomize this archetype, achieving greatness through valor and individual feats. The European conception tends to emphasize the hero as a solitary figure overcoming external challenges, often rewarded with glory and divine favor (Schmidt, 2001).

Achebe's heroes, on the other hand, are not defined by their detachment from their societies but by their integration into them. Their authority and heroism stem from their roles as leaders, protectors, and preservers of cultural norms. Validation of their status comes not from gods or monarchs but from the communal recognition of their contributions. Achebe uses his protagonists to explore the challenges inherent in leadership within the African context, particularly during periods of cultural and historical transition. Okonkwo's leadership is characterized by physical and social dominance. His decision-making, however, is often influenced by his fear of failure and perceived weakness, which ultimately alienates him from his community. His defiance of colonial authority reflects a desperate attempt to preserve traditional values but also reveals the limitations of his inflexible mindset. Ezeulu's leadership is distinct in its spiritual and moral foundation. Unlike Okonkwo, Ezeulu's heroism involves mediating between his people and the divine. However, his refusal to align with the colonial administration and his personal vendetta against his community lead to devastating consequences, highlighting the tension between individual agency and communal responsibility.

Both Okonkwo and Ezeulu face tragic fates that are shaped by traditional beliefs and practices. Okonkwo's suicide at the novel's end symbolizes his ultimate disconnection from the community he sought to protect. His inability to adapt to the changing dynamics brought by colonialism underscores the fragility of traditional heroism in a modernizing world. Ezeulu's fate, marked by isolation and the erosion of his spiritual authority, reflects the perils of rigidly adhering to tradition amidst social upheaval. His refusal to announce the New Yam Festival as an act of revenge results in widespread famine, alienating him from his people and undermining his status as a hero. Achebe's portrayal of heroism transcends the individual, serving as a lens through which to examine the broader socio-political and cultural challenges of African societies during the colonial era. His heroes, while flawed, symbolize resistance against external forces and the struggle to maintain cultural identity. By grounding heroism in community and tradition, Achebe challenges the reader to reconsider the metrics by which heroism is evaluated. In nutshell, Achebe's novels reframe heroism as a construct deeply intertwined with cultural values and communal responsibility. While his heroes share certain traits with their European counterparts, such as bravery and determination, their narratives are firmly rooted in the collective experiences of their societies. Through Okonkwo and Ezeulu, Achebe illuminates the complexities of African heroism and its role in navigating the historical and cultural transformations brought about by colonialism.

Achebe's portrayal of heroism, as seen in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, aligns with Sunday Anazie's assertion that African novels often serve as a reflection of sociological realities. Anazie emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual experiences and collective societal challenges in African literature (*Sociologie du roman africain*, 1970). Achebe's heroes, Okonkwo and Ezeulu, embody this intersection, as their personal struggles are deeply intertwined with their community's cultural dilemmas. Similarly, Mouhamadou Kane's exploration of the tension between tradition and modernity in African novels sheds light on Achebe's narrative approach. Kane asserts that the African novel often grapples with the dual challenge of preserving

cultural identity while confronting colonial modernity (Roman africain et tradition, 1982). Achebe's depiction of Okonkwo as a traditional Igbo hero struggling against colonial forces exemplifies this tension. Ezeulu's nuanced stance, balancing spiritual leadership with the pressures of a changing society, aligns with Kane's observation that African heroes are frequently positioned as intermediaries between two conflicting worlds. Charles Larson provides additional insights into the archetype of the African hero. He argues that African novels, including Achebe's works, often portray heroes as symbols of resilience and continuity amid disruption (Panorama du roman africain, 1972). Larson's perspective enhances our understanding of Achebe's characters as embodiments of cultural preservation and resistance against colonial imposition.

**The Challenges of the Heroes:** The heroes in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* endure multifaceted challenges that define their narratives and underline their struggles with personal, cultural, and colonial forces. These challenges serve as a lens to explore the dynamics of heroism in African societies disrupted by colonization. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo strives to transcend the perceived weaknesses of his father, Unoka, who was seen as unsuccessful and effeminate. His obsession with distancing himself from this legacy propels him to achieve social and economic success, including earning the title of an Umuofia elder and becoming a role model within the community. However, his relentless pursuit of masculine ideals leads to inflexibility, alienating him from both family and community. For example, his violent outbursts, such as beating his wife during the Week of Peace, directly violate sacred customs, resulting in severe social consequences (Achebe, 1958). This rigidity is further tested when European colonizers introduce Christianity and new governance, which disrupt traditional Igbo practices. Okonkwo's inability to adapt to these societal changes culminates in his tragic demise, symbolizing the challenges of reconciling tradition and modernity in a colonized context.

Similarly, in *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu faces the burden of maintaining his position as the chief priest of Ulu amidst colonial encroachments. His steadfast loyalty to traditional customs creates tensions within his community, particularly as he refuses to cooperate with the British colonial administration, which employs divide-and-rule tactics to weaken local leadership (Achebe, 1964). Ezeulu's challenges are exacerbated by internal disputes within his society, including accusations of being a tool of colonial forces, which undermine his authority. His decision to delay the yam festival—a critical event for agricultural and spiritual harmony—out of personal vengeance against his community illustrates the consequences of placing individual grievances above collective welfare. This act of defiance highlights how internal and external conflicts interplay to destabilize societal cohesion.

Both Okonkwo and Ezeulu are caught between their adherence to tradition and the transformative pressures of colonialism. Okonkwo's rigid masculinity and Ezeulu's unyielding spiritual convictions illustrate the dangers of inflexibility in the face of cultural and political upheaval. Their struggles also reveal the complexities of leadership during periods of intense social change. As noted by Larson (1971), in Igbo society, a man's value is determined by his actions rather than his lineage,

emphasizing the heroes' responsibility to act in ways that reflect societal values. However, both characters' actions frequently contravene these expectations, leading to alienation and tragedy. For instance, Okonkwo's disregard for sacred laws—such as his attack on Ekwefi during the Peace Week—disrupts the spiritual balance of his community, prompting divine retribution and social ostracism (Achebe, 1958). Similarly, Ezeulu's refusal to accommodate the colonial regime results in his imprisonment and eventual loss of communal trust, showcasing the internal conflicts heroes face when navigating their duties within a colonized society. Achebe's portrayal of the heroes further reflects the paradoxical relationship between tradition and modernity. While both novels illustrate the destructive effects of colonial rule, they also critique the internal contradictions and hierarchical structures within Igbo society. The heroes' inability to foster unity amidst these challenges underscores the difficulty of sustaining cultural identity in the face of external domination and internal division. In short, the challenges faced by Okonkwo and Ezeulu reflect broader themes of resistance, adaptation, and the intersection of personal and collective identities. These narratives highlight the fragility of leadership and the complexities of navigating cultural change during colonial encounters. By examining these challenges, Achebe not only critiques the colonial enterprise but also explores the intricacies of African heroism in the face of societal transformation.

The challenges faced by Okonkwo and Ezeulu reflect what Marc Rombaut describes as the poetic tension within African literature, where characters navigate the clash between ancestral traditions and the encroaching forces of modernity (*La poésie négro-africaine d'expression française*, 1976). Rombaut's insights underscore the spiritual and emotional struggles of Achebe's heroes as they attempt to reconcile their personal identities with their communities' expectations. In addition, Pius Nganda Nkashama's critique of African literature as a medium for interrogating societal transformation adds depth to this analysis. Nkashama posits that the protagonists in African novels often become vessels for collective anxieties about cultural erosion and colonial domination (*La littérature africaine écrite*, 1979). Okonkwo's defiance of colonial authority and Ezeulu's spiritual resistance to foreign rule mirror these anxieties, highlighting the multifaceted challenges of leadership in a rapidly transforming society.

**Heroes' Fate:** The tragic destinies of Achebe's heroes resonate with Marthe Robert's exploration of origins and narratives in literature. Robert contends that the fate of literary heroes is often a reflection of broader existential and cultural conflicts (*Roman des origines et origines du roman*, 1972). Okonkwo's suicide and Ezeulu's alienation symbolize the cultural disintegration and identity crises wrought by colonialism. Furthermore, Mineke Schipper's analysis of African literature as a critical lens for examining Western influences reinforces this interpretation. Schipper argues that African authors like Achebe use their narratives to critique the colonial project and its destructive impact on traditional societies (*Le Blanc vu d'Afrique*, 1973). The ultimate collapse of Okonkwo's and Ezeulu's authority illustrates the profound disruptions colonial forces impose on indigenous systems. Finally, Daniël Stewart's exploration of anglophone African novels situates Achebe's works within a broader literary tradition that interrogates the consequences of colonial rule (*Le*

roman africain anglophone depuis 1965 d'Achebe à Soyinka, 1988). Stewart highlights the recurring motif of resistance in Achebe's novels, where the heroes' tragic outcomes serve as poignant critiques of both colonialism and internal societal contradictions. That is to say that the theme of the hero's fate, marked by personal and societal struggles, lies at the heart of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. In both novels, the protagonists—Okonkwo and Ezeulu—grapple with the disruptive forces of colonialism and internal societal transformations. Despite their unwavering commitment to their roles as traditional leaders and protectors of their communities, their inability to adapt to evolving circumstances culminates in tragic ends. This analysis explores the heroes' struggles, drawing connections between their fates and broader themes of resistance, cultural preservation, and the consequences of rigid ideologies. Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*, epitomizes the archetype of a traditional Igbo hero. His life is driven by the pursuit of personal success and societal recognition, exemplified by his prowess in warfare, wealth accumulation, and leadership in his village of Umuofia. His heroism is, however, marred by a fundamental flaw: his inability to adapt to change. As European colonial forces infiltrate Igbo society, they introduce Christianity and Western governance, undermining traditional beliefs and structures. Okonkwo's resistance to these changes stems from his deeply ingrained fear of failure and dishonor. He views compromise as weakness and stubbornly adheres to the values of his ancestors. This resistance culminates in his tragic suicide—a final act of defiance against a society he perceives as irreparably altered. By taking his own life, Okonkwo also embodies the ultimate failure in Igbo cosmology, as suicide is considered an abomination. His fate reflects Achebe's critique of inflexible traditionalism in the face of historical transformation.

In *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu serves as the chief priest of Ulu, the central deity of Umuaro. Unlike Okonkwo, Ezeulu exhibits a level of open-mindedness, as evidenced by his decision to send his son Oduche to learn the ways of the colonizers. However, Ezeulu's heroism is undermined by his rigid sense of divine authority and personal pride. He views himself as the ultimate arbiter of his community's spiritual and moral order, which alienates him from both the colonial administration and his own people. Ezeulu's refusal to align with the colonial government's agenda leads to his imprisonment, further isolating him from his community. Upon his release, he delays the harvest festival in a punitive act against his people, believing this to be Ulu's will. This decision exacerbates famine, causing his community to lose faith in him and turn to Christianity for salvation. Ezeulu's downfall is cemented by the death of his beloved son, Obika, symbolizing the final collapse of his authority. His tragic fate underscores the dangers of unchecked pride and the consequences of failing to bridge traditional values with the demands of a changing world. While Okonkwo and Ezeulu share a commitment to preserving their communities' traditions, their approaches and eventual downfalls differ. Okonkwo's heroism is grounded in physical strength and a warrior ethos, whereas Ezeulu's is rooted in spiritual authority and intellectual foresight. However, both characters succumb to the rigidity of their respective ideologies, rendering them unable to navigate the complexities of colonial encroachment. Okonkwo's tragedy stems from his defiant rejection of the new order. He clings to a vision of Igbo society that no longer exists, leading him to make decisions that alienate him from his community.

In contrast, Ezeulu's downfall arises from his inability to reconcile his role as a spiritual leader with the evolving needs of his people. His insistence on divine authority over communal consensus ultimately drives a wedge between him and his community, paving the way for cultural disintegration. Achebe uses the fates of Okonkwo and Ezeulu to illustrate the broader consequences of cultural collision and transformation. The arrival of colonial forces disrupts the established social order, challenging traditional notions of leadership and heroism. In both novels, the protagonists' inability to adapt serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of rigidity in the face of inevitable change. Okonkwo and Ezeulu's stories also reflect Achebe's nuanced perspective on tradition and modernity. While Achebe critiques colonialism's destructive impact, he also emphasizes the need for adaptability and resilience. As he notes in an interview, "Life must continue, and if you refuse to accept change, however tragic, you will be expelled out." This sentiment underscores the tragic irony of the heroes' fates: their attempts to preserve their communities ultimately contribute to their unraveling. The fates of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* highlight the complex interplay between individual agency and historical forces. Their tragic downfalls serve as poignant reminders of the challenges of leadership in times of upheaval and the necessity of balancing tradition with adaptability. Achebe's portrayal of these heroes underscores the enduring relevance of their struggles, inviting readers to reflect on the dynamics of cultural change and the costs of heroism in an evolving world.

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