THE DIALOGICAL SELF IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to provide a new reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) from the perspective of Dialogical Self Theory, which views the self as a complex set of interrelated positions developed through social interaction. This study illustrates how Okonkwo's self moves from one I-position to another according to changes in situation and time. In Okonkwo's interactions with other people, he invokes various internal and external I-positions, where different people arouse different parts in his "self" and perform inner dialogues between these positions. These internal and external I-positions disagree with each other. However, despite this dialogue, new positions failed to emerge. Okonkwo's decision to kill himself at the end illustrates his failure to form a successful dialogical relation among his multiple I-positions.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe; Dialogical Self theory; Hubert Hermans; Internal vs. External I-positions; *Things Fall Apart*

INTRODUCTION

Although extensive study has been carried out on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) from various critical perspectives, none has read it so far through the lens of Dialogical Self Theory that has gained increasing popularity at the hands of Hubert Hermans since the 1990s. The significance of this theory lies in its description of the self's ability to create different positions in its relations with others in both external and internal dialogues. The self, the theory argues, "has the capability to move spatially from one position to another according to situational and temporal changes. It fluctuates

among different and even opposed positions" (Hermans 2001, 28). These different positions are in dialogue with each other and confront each other in several relations of power, influenced by socially defined positions, such as being a member of gender, class and race.

The importance of this theory lies in its ability to show how the self in many literary texts can move among different internal and external positions and, thus, perform inner dialogues. This is typically true of Okonkwo's self, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. By analysing Okonkwo's actions throughout the novel, this study aims to show how Okonkwo's different I-positions move from one position to another according to the changes in his surrounding situations and time. More specifically, this article attempts to show how some of Okonkwo's internal and external I-positions disagree with each other, and how he attempts to suppress this emotional I-position and keeps his dominant I as a strong masculine position. In this process, dialogue between Okonkwo's different I-positions occur. However, in this dialogue, new positions fail to emerge. Okonkwo's decision to kill himself at the end illustrates his failure to form a successful dialogical relation among his multiple I-positions.

DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY

Before applying the dialogical self theory to Okonkwo's actions, it is pertinent to outline some key elements of the theory. First and foremost, the two notions, dialogue and self, come from various psychological and philosophical traditions. For example, the psychology of the self finds its inspiration in William James, whereas the notion of dialogue has its origin in the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin. James' notion of the extended self is central to the dialogical self, which Hermans regards as "a huge step forward in thinking about the nature of self and identity" (Hermans 2014, 137). However, Hermans modifies James' conception of the self. As Hermans (2014, 137) explains:

> In James's view … the other is portrayed as a me or mine, not as an I. To go beyond this limitation, we must make an additional step: upgrading the other person from the object level to the subject level so that dialogical relationships become possible.

Thus, Hermans, unlike James, thinks that "the other is not outside the self but rather an intrinsic part of it ... there is no sharp separation between the internal life of the self and the 'outside' world, but rather a gradual transition" (Hermans 2010, 190). From Hermans' perspective, one of the most important characteristics of the dialogical self is the role of the other. Each person becomes a "society of mind" where the self is open and accessible to the important others, and dialogical relations are to be constructed between these significant others and the self. As Stone et al. (2012, 26) observe:

> The dialogical self-position is created only as it defines itself from others' positions. The I only exists because there is a you. Relationships are not merely individual I's interacting, but the relationship between the two is what creates the sense of I.

From the Dialogical theory's perspective, the self is an extended entity, living in an internal and external space, and other people are playing a role in this self. Since so many people have relations with the self, this self becomes a society. What can happen in the society can also happen within one's self. As Hermans (2014, 138) puts it,

> The self, regarded as a society of I-positions, has the potential of allowing dialogical relationships not only between different people and groups positioned in the larger society, but also between different positions in the self of one and the same person. In this view, the other is not simply mine but rather another I.

This means that other people are part of one's self, and play a part in shaping the self's experience. They become external "I"-positions in the repertoire of the self, shaping one's experience. Their role in that experience depends on their presence or absence in the actual formation of I-positions and voices in each situation. These I-positions are not isolated from each other but become involved in shared dialogues. They interact with each other where they agree and disagree with each other. "Each of them has a story to tell about their own experiences from their own specific point of view" (Hermans 2014, 139).

At the same time, the dialogical self theory is built partly on Bakhtin's notion of the polyphonic novel, which refers to the fact that a novel has many 'authors' and not just one, and is "composed of a number of independent and mutually opposing viewpoints embodied by characters involved in dialogical relationships" (Hermans 2014, 138). It is exactly from Bakhtin's polyphonic novel that Hermans borrows the notions of dialogue and multi-voicedness. Like Bakhtin, Hermans assumes that the self is dialogical or polyphonic, that it has many different I-positions and each I-position can tell its own story. In this dialogical relationship, one part of the self speaks to another part, while the other part listens. Since the self is polyphonic, constituted by different "voiced positions," it is also capable of being extended and of having a dialogue among these voices. As Hermans (2012, 2) contends:

> The idea of a self as dialogically extended to an independent other seemed to be a fertile road to go in formulating a new theory. In this theory, the self as a "society of mind" is seen as a promising metaphor as it has the potential of extending the self to a broader societal and historical context.

Drawing from James and Bakhtin, Hermans built his theory of the Dialogical Self; a "composite term in which James's extended self is brought together with Bakhtin's notion of dialogue" (2015, 2). Hermans extends James' and Bakhtin's theory by postulating that the self has several I-positions. This multiplicity of the I-positions is in dialogue with each other within the self. As Hermans explains:

> The dialogical self is based on the assumption that there are many I-positions that can be occupied by the same person. The I in the one position, moreover, can agree, disagree,

understand, misunderstand, oppose, contradict, question, challenge and even ridicule the I in another position. (2001, 29)

Thus, Hermans' definition of the dialogical self encompasses both James' and Bakhtin's ideas of the self. He defines it as "the dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in an imaginary landscape" (1993, 215). Moreover, Hermans identifies two types of I-positions: one is internal and another external. The first represents those positions considered as parts of the self (e.g. I as a masculine, and I as an emotional self). The second refers to exterior positions representing everything that occurs in the world that is internalized and perceived as important (e.g. my father, my sons and daughters, my tribe and even my enemy). Both internal and external I-positions argue with each other in an internal dialogue which, in normal cases, gives rise to a multilayered self. However, in other cases, if one I-position dominates and orders most experience (e.g. "self-as-violent" or "self-as-strong"), then a monological self-organization would result, leading to the person being locked within one position. This is typically true of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*.

OKONKWO'S I-POSITIONS IN *THINGS FALL APART*

Since "the application of Hermans' theory has been extended to social sciences, political sciences and literature" (Elshaikh 2011, 394), Hermans' notion of external and internal I-positions provides a good way to understand Okonkwo's actions throughout the novel. From the lens of this theory, one can view Okonkwo's self as having multiple internal and external I-positions. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo's self has one dominant internal I-position that interacts with other internal and external positions through dialogical relationships. Okonkwo's internal I-position as a masculine and strong leader has a dialogical relationship with other external I-positions such as his I-positions as a son to Unoka, as a father to Ikemefuna, Nwoye, and Ezinma and as a member of a colonized tribe that has its own notions of masculinity.

OKONKWO'S INTERNAL I-POSITIONS

From the point of view of the dialogical self theory, Okonkwo's self consists of different internal I-positions, where "each position is associated with a valuation system different from the valuations of the other positions" (Hermans 1997, 244). What seems valuable or important from the masculine I-position can be estimated as meaningless from the emotional I-position. What seems valuable from an emotional I-position is different from the actual external I-position. Therefore, each internal I-position embodies an explicit evaluative standpoint and has a capacity to exchange ideas with other positions, to agree or disagree, or even to dominate and suppress other I-positions. In Okonkwo's case, one can identify two dominant internal I-positions, I-as-a strong masculine leader, and I-as-an emotional man. These internal I-positions remain in conflict with his other

external I-positions such as his positions as a son, as a father, and as a member of a colonized tribe. These internal and external I-positions are struggling to maintain their importance within Okonkwo's I-positioning experience. Throughout the novel, within Okonkwo's mind, we keep hearing these two voices, one that is trying to take control of his self, whilst the other is resisting. This creates an inner struggle in which he has to either suppress or allow this I-position in his relationship with people around him. On many occasions, it is the domination of his *masculine I* that does not allow his *emotional I* to take control.

OKONKWO'S MASCULINE I-POSITION

From the very first pages of *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo endorses the belief that violence is manly. The model of masculinity on which Okonkwo grew up was mainly one that stressed bravery and physical strength. Okonkwo's bodily strength is obvious in his relationship with the people around him. From the very first page, Okonkwo is "well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (3) for his physical power so that his muscles, when fighting, "stood out on [his] arms . . . and one almost heard them stretching to the breaking point" (3). After winning his wrestling match with the unbeaten Amalinze the Cat, Okonkwo's I-position as a strong masculine man gradually emerges as a representative of masculinity: "Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness" (153). Believing only in masculinity, Okonkwo decides to live his life from this masculine I-position. Thus, he seeks to develop himself in his society by achieving things that have been highly admired by his own people:

> To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. (8)

Thus, throughout his life, Okonkwo's I-position as a strong masculine man becomes strengthened and more voiced in Okonkwo's self and creates more tension in his self. Okonkwo's "life had been ruled by a great passion--to become one of the lords of the clan. That had been his life-spring. And he had all but achieved it" (131). Therefore, he works hard to gain strength and empowerment, and positions himself as someone who is redefining himself. He understands that masculine qualities such as physical strength, lack of emotions, and bravery have continuously been described as the natural and intrinsic features of manhood, whose zenith is achievable only in wrestling and fighting battles. To accomplish fame and power, Okonkwo consistently resorts to violence. "Without regard for consequences, Okonkwo acts: he kills Ikemefuna, beats his son, repudiates his father, butchers the messenger. He becomes the apotheosis of violent action and as such ultimately destroys himself" (Iyasere 1998, 139).

Throughout his life, Okonkwo tries to uphold this internal masculine I-position as central to his other internal and external I-positions. It directs his actions towards others to the extent that he "was popularly called the Roaring Flame … [and] a flaming fire" (153). Thus, being a strong masculine man "whose anger welled up within him" (29) is a salient part of his self that tends to override other positions. On many occasions, Okonkwo uses his own violence and strength to clarify his thoughts, guide his decisions and assert his beliefs, even when dealing with his wives and other members of his family. For example, Okonkwo "ruled his household with a heavy hand" (13). He has been violent with his youngest wife, who went to braid her hair without preparing his meal. "In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace … Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (29-30). In another example, Okonkwo is about to murder his second wife and beat his son Nwoye when he hears about his son being converted to Christianity.

Moreover, Okonkwo takes every chance to instil into his sons from a young age the masculine ideals of self-reliance, stoicism, and dominance over women, and to tell them masculine stories of violence and bloodshed: "Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his obi, and he told them stories of the land--masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" (53). Thus, the stories he told his sons are stories of violence and war: "Nwoye and Ikemefuna would listen to Okonkwo's stories about tribal wars, or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim, overpowered him and obtained his first human head" (54). By telling these stories, Okonkwo is attempting to raise his sons in a culture that adores a particular construction of masculinity and encourages its members to be impulsive and physically strong.

> 'Worthy men are no more,' Okonkwo sighed as he remembered those days. 'Isike will never forget how we slaughtered them in that war. We killed twelve of their men and they killed only two of ours. Before the end of the fourth market week they were suing for peace. Those were days when men were men.' (200)

Okonkwo internalized and reconstructed the masculine position held by his own society and incorporates it in himself. He lives with a tribe, where "violent deaths were frequent," (124) and this is a place that only knows and respects violence:

> Umuofia was feared by all its neighbours. It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country. Its most potent war-medicine was as old as the clan itself. (11)

These established masculine notions practically control every aspect of Okonkwo's life. To be tough and stoic, to lack emotional expression has long been a hallmark of Okonkwo's culture, which still emphasizes the predominant view of being a man – do not talk about your feelings because sharing one's feelings is less than manly. Moreover, this culture defines and enacts masculine traits and behaviours. The strong masculine has been one of the most prevailing forms of masculinity within Nigerian tribal traditions. As a member of an Igbo culture which requires its members to hide their feelings,

Okonkwo believes that hiding his emotions is the main characteristic of being tough and a real man. The pressure to uphold this traditional idea of masculinity stopped Okonkwo from expressing his emotions openly. As Scott Cunningham and Matt Dwyer (2017) have lucidly argued, in some cultures such as the Igbo one:

> expressing emotion equals emotional weakness. This forces men to hide fear, anxiety, pain, sadness, and self-doubt behind a façade of confidence and competence. Men are told from an early age to hide weakness and exude strength, which alienates themselves and others from the emotionally-rich parts of themselves. Too often these feelings are expressed through the more "acceptable" masculine emotion: anger. This expression limits men in their emotional expressiveness and may lead to their feelings being expressed through anger, aggression, self-destructive behaviour such as substance abuse, or even violence.

Thus, Okonkwo's tribal traditions and notions of masculinity prohibit him from expressing his own feelings in order not to be "feminine." Okonkwo is living in a culture that requires its members to suppress their emotions because to be emotional is to be feminine, and to lose one's power and strength. For example, although "Okonkwo was especially fond of Ezinma … his fondness only showed on very rare occasions" (44). Thus, Okonkwo has assimilated his tribe's admiration of masculinity and violence and internalized them. He also endorses what comprises the qualities of masculinity.

> That was why Okonkwo had been chosen by the nine villages to carry a message of war to their enemies unless they agreed to give up a young man and a virgin to atone for the murder of Udo's wife. And such was the deep fear that their enemies had for Umuofia that they treated Okonkwo like a king and brought him a virgin who was given to Udo as wife, and the lad Ikemefuna. (27)

Okonkwo believes that endorsing violent masculinity will bestow on him traditional privileges such as being the greatest wrestler throughout the nine villages. Okonkwo is aware that this masculine I-position fits him for his role as a leader: "he was a man of action, a man of war" (10). On many occasions, he is attempting to verify this I-position and trying to be seen by others, and by himself, as "the greatest wrestler and warrior alive" (118). Thus, for his masculine strength and bravery, Okonkwo is chosen to be the "proud and imperious emissary of war" (9) when a war is about to break out between Umuofia and the clan of Mbaino. This explains why Okonkwo is saddened when his own clansmen abandon their old ways of violence and war: "What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight? . . . We must fight these men and drive them from the land" (124). Because he was brought up in a culture that held notions of what it means to be a man, Okonkwo thought of people in Mbanta as "a womanly clan, he thought, [because] such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia" (159). Okonkwo is living in a culture that upholds a particular notion of manliness as a central social custom, and supports this sense of masculinity and violence.

Okonkwo's masculine self affects his other external I-positions such as being the son of Unoka. As a matter of fact, the prominence of Okonkwo's internal masculine I-position is clearly visible in his external I-position as a son to his father, Unoka, which

affects him in his relationship with other people around him. For example, from his internal masculine I-position, Okonkwo considers many of his father's characteristics to be feminine. In Okonkwo's eyes, "Unoka, the grown-up, [is] a failure," (12) as he "ha[s] taken no title at all and he [is] heavily in debt" (13) when he dies. And so, Okonkwo's overwhelming worry is that he will become like his father who was rebuked by Chika, the priestess of the clan, for acting like women:

> You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your machete and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms - you stay at home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man. (17-18)

Thus, "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion - to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness" (5). For example, unlike his father, Okonkwo can stand the look of blood. "In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head and he was not an old man yet" (4). That is why Okonkwo wants to be everything his father is not: strong, autonomous, stoical, and tough. In his need to resolve this conflict between his internal I-masculine position and his external I-son-to-Unoka position, Okonkwo seeks to challenge the softness of his father and to separate himself from anything that may defy his understanding of strength and dignity, including his own emotions. Therefore, "Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (18). Despite Okonkwo's attempt to show only anger and violence, his actions and behaviour towards those who are very close to him illustrate his other internal I-position: as an emotional man.

OKONKWO'S I-AS-AN-EMOTIONAL MAN

As it is mentioned before, Okonkwo's self has another internal I-position, I-as-an-emotional man, which takes a central role in defining Okonkwo as both a father and as a masculine violent man. However, in his I-as-a-father position, Okonkwo attempts to hide his feelings from others as he believes that hiding his emotions is the very essence of manhood. Thus, because of his emotional I-position, Okonkwo starts to criticize himself and becomes involved in a serious internal conflict, not very different from the conflict he can have with another person. Okonkwo's internal conflict finds an explanation from the perspective of Dialogical self-theory. According to Hermans, "when one I-position is in power (e.g., I as masculine and violent), the other (e.g., I as father) is dominated, suppressed, or silenced" (Hermans 2014, 140). This is true of Okonkwo whose masculine I-position, and his emotional I-position are in negotiation with each other. The continuous dialogue of these I-positions is modified to suit context and time and becomes visible in his relationship with his daughter Ezinma and with his adopted son, Ikemefuna.

EZINMA

Okonkwo's I-position-as-an-emotional father is exemplified when he devotes some time to his daughter Ezinma, whom he loves and values very much. "Of all his children, she alone understood his every mood. A bond of sympathy had grown between them as the years had passed" (172). Moreover, in one of his conversations with Obierika, Okonkwo admits that "if Ezinma had been a boy I would have been happier. She has the right spirit" (66). Thus, in his relationship with his daughter, Okonkwo's I-position as a strong masculine recedes a little bit and allows his I-as-an-emotional father to step forward, even though "his fondness [for Ezinma] only showed on rare occasions" (44). From the lens of the dialogical theory, this father/daughter relationship invites Okonkwo to construct a system of valuations from the viewpoint of "I-as-a-strong leader "and another system of valuations from the perspective of "I-as-a-father." "Each position then has its story to tell in accordance with the notion of the multivoiced self" (Hermans 1997, 245). This means that, both I-as-a-strong and I-as-an-emotional-person coexists in the same space within Okonkwo's self simultaneously, and they interact constantly where he is both a strong leader and an emotional father.

IKEMEFUNA

Okonkwo's internal I-positions as a masculine man and as an affectionate father are clearly manifested when he finds himself beginning to love Ikemefuna, the boy who, by verdict of the elders, comes to live in his home. Like his emotional relation with his daughter, Ezinma, Okonkwo's emotion towards Ikemefuna is a hidden affection, not to be externally revealed, because of the emotional constraints imposed by his own Igbo culture. Therefore, he deals with Ikemefuna as he treats others – using violence:

> Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy - inwardly of course … He therefore treated Ikemefuna as he treated everybody else - with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. Sometimes when he went to big village meetings or communal ancestral feasts he allowed Ikemefuna to accompany him, like a son, carrying his stool and his goatskin bag. And, indeed, Ikemefuna called him father. (21)

This quote above demonstrates the dialogical interaction between his masculine I-position, his emotional I-position and his social environment. While Okonkwo does not want to let go of his emotional I ("no doubt that he liked the boy"), his masculine and violent I speaks out louder ("with a heavy hand "). What could have happened here is that Okonkwo's I-position as a violent masculine leader who is strictly following his own Igbo traditions is backgrounded, and his I-position as an emotional father, concerned with his new adopted son, becomes foregrounded and determines his relations with the boy. In his I-position as a father to an adopted son, Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is confronted with the conflict between his I-position as member of a community that has its own traditions and his I-as-a-father that has an emotion towards an adopted son that he must kill by

himself. After killing Ikemefuna, Okonkwo's dialogical self, I-as-a-father to a murdered son is in dialogue with the other I-position as a strong man devoid of emotion and within his own mind there ensues an internal monologue:

> 'When did you become a shivering old woman,' Okonkwo asked himself, 'you, who are known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? How can a man who has killed five men in battle fall to pieces because he has added a boy to their number? Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed.' (23)

In the above quotation, we can see that Okonkwo's I-position as an emotional father causes his feelings of sadness towards his adopted son's death. This is due to the powerful I-position of a strong masculine man which leads to the configuration of other voices within his self in that context. In other words, as an emotional father, Okonkwo judges the situation as depressing and causing sadness. But, on reflection, and from the masculine I-position, he sees his immediate judgement of the situation as unusual: "Okonkwo, you have become a woman indeed" (23). We see Okonkwo's present "I" (emotional man) coming together with his old "I" (violent man) to uniquely weave this emotional experience involving feelings of sadness, repentance and depression.

The killing of Ikemefuna has a vivid and distressing effect on him, and to get rid of that feeling, Okonkwo must divert his thinking and behaviour towards some violent yet peaceful action. Consequently, Okonkwo focuses his attention on physical and violent activities rather than the distressing memory of murdering Ikemefuna. As Achebe states:

> All that he required was something to occupy his mind. If he had killed Ikemefuna during the busy planting season or harvesting it would not have been so bad, his mind would have been centred on his work. Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action. But in absence of work, talking was the next best. (25)

In this quote, a shift in dialogue can be observed when Okonkwo contrasts his self as he was before and his self after killing Ikemefuna. By getting himself busy, Okonkwo states that his temper has somewhat improved. He elucidates that his preoccupation with planting and harvesting makes him feel that he can accept the fact that he has killed one of the people dearest to his heart. By this acceptance, Okonkwo experiences somewhat more purpose in his existence. He continues to meditate his position, yet he has created ways of well-being that liberate him from his enduring feelings of shame and guilt.

Apparently, Okonkwo does not isolate his I-position as a father and I-position as a masculine leader from each other but attempts to move from one frame to the other. However, he fails to give a meaningful dialogical response to his I-position as a strong masculine man devoid of any emotions. In this way, he is unable to acknowledge that he is present as two I-positions in his emotional relationship with his adopted son, and he fails to start a dialogical relationship between his two positions, I-as-a-leader and I-as-a-father to a murdered son. Because he fails to create a satisfactory dialogue between his "I as father" and "I as masculine leader" internal positions, Okonkwo carries this conflict with him onward. The constant moral predicament posed by these conflicting

rulings leaves Okonkwo in a state of dialogical regression without a satisfactory answer for such basic questions of whether he is fundamentally human and an emotional father or fundamentally masculine and a violent leader. Okonkwo fails to resolve the dialogical tension that develops between his two I-positions of "strong masculine" and "affectionate man." According to the Dialogical Self theory, Okonkwo can reconcile this tension by bringing the masculine and the affectionate into a "coalition"; a third position that incorporates elements from both. However, he fails to do so. Given the extreme challenges to Okonkwo's self because of killing Ikemefuna, it is likely that Okonkwo may resort to extreme measures to preserve stability amongst his internal and external I-positions. This is very clear in his external I-position as a defiant to white colonizers.

I AS A DEFIANT TO WHITE CULTURE

The domination of Okonkwo's masculine I-position over other external I-positions is explicable through Okonkwo's relations with people around him. As previously discussed, Okonkwo's masculine and violent I-position finds expression and gains strength until it has been challenged by other external I-positions such as being a member of a colonized society. The existence of the white men challenges Okonkwo's I-position as a masculine and strong leader. Okonkwo recognizes that "the white man is very clever … He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (176). Moreover, the white men are so strong that Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, states his fear of them: "I am greatly afraid. We have heard stories about white men who made the powerful guns and the strong drinks and took slaves away across the seas" (140-141). In addition, it is the white man that orderes Okonkwo to be arrested and humiliated with other leaders of his tribe. After being free, Okonkwo premeditates his vengeance through a reprisal:

> As he lay on his bamboo bed he thought about the treatment he had received in the white man's court, and he swore vengeance. If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they chose to be cowards, he would go out and avenge himself. (199)

As a violent man, Okonkwo demands violent action in facing the white colonizers. For example, Okonkwo blames the people of Abame for not resisting as much as they can and fighting them: 'They were fools,' said Okonkwo after a pause. 'They had been warned that danger was ahead. They should have armed themselves with their guns and their machetes even when they went to the market' (140). Okonkwo believes in violence as a solution to every problem, especially when dealing with the white colonizers. He urges his own people to resist violently:

> 'Let us not reason like cowards,' said Okonkwo. 'If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does. These people are daily pouring filth over us, and Okeke says we should pretend not to

see.' Okonkwo made a sound full of disgust. This was a womanly clan, he thought. Such a thing could never happen in his fatherland, Umuofia." (56)

Okonkwo is unable to realize that his tribe's power in many ways never matches the strength of white people because "the white man's fetish had unbelievable power" (139). Thus, he understands how the white people become stronger and more dominant: "the white man whose power you know too well has ordered this meeting to stop" (204).

Okonkwo's masculine position has been challenged with a new I-position, a member of a colonized tribe. This creates in him a sense of hatred towards his colonizers: "he confronted the head messenger, trembling with hate, unable to utter a word. The man was fearless and stood his ground, his four men lined up behind him" (204). In this situation, Okonkwo's masculine I-because it is in tension with his external I-position as a resistance to the white colonizer. He must act and decide quickly to resolve this tension:

> In a flash Okonkwo drew his machete. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo's machete descended twice and the man's head lay beside his uniformed body. (204)

Okonkwo expects that his community will join him in resisting the colonizers. He realizes that they will not resist. Instead, they let him down:

> He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: 'Why did he do it?' (205)

After his community lets him down, Okonkwo is struggling with a deeper existential question of what to do with his life. He has two options. The first is to live and fight the white colonizers, and this requires him to compromise and accept the change that encompasses his tribe. As changes overlap Okonkwo's society, his self is in need of innovating to meet this change. "In the case of a transition, the self is confronted with a new, unfamiliar or even threatening situation that requires an adaption or reorganization of the self" (Hermans 2010, 239). However, his I-position as a human being capable of change does not seem to carry the same significance and impact. Okonkwo never perceives his self as flexible, and he is not able to change. He is not aware that it is vital to be able to shift from "me" being a masculine violent member of the clan to "me" being an emotional human being. Thus, he decides to go with the second option, that is to say, to kill himself.

OKONKWO'S SUICIDAL ACT

Okonkwo's decision to kill himself finds its explanation from the dialogical self-theory, where Okonkwo's different I-positions fail to sustain a dialogue within his own self. According to the theory, Okonkwo's problem is that he has failed to widen his dominant masculine I-position to include his other external and internal I-positions

in new contextual situations. In other words, Okonkwo's inability to recognize the multiplicity and diversification of his I-positions cannot prevent his self from falling apart. Presumably, Okonkwo is unable to move easily among these many voices and adopt the one that is most appropriate to him. In other words, he is not able to adopt a compromise position that integrates two or more positions. This results in a failure to establish a dialogical relationship between the different I-positions. In this case, according to the dialogical theory (Gieser 2011, 25), he fails because:

> Such dialogical relationships are contrasted with monological relationship in which one or a few positions are dominant in the self, with the result that other positions are silenced or suppressed or otherwise not allowed to speak from their own specific point of view.

Thus, the ending of the novel explains Okonkwo's failure to participate in any internal or external dialogue at all. Although Okonkwo does not mention any suicidal wish before this act, he is obviously unaware of the failure of the dialogical relations between his internal and external I-positions. Okonkwo's dialogical self does not have, to use Hermans' words, "the capacity to be innovative, that is, to change through positioning and re-positioning" (Hermans 2014, 136). As Hermans (2014, 136) has stated,

> The self is subjected to decentring movements when, for example, a person enters a new, confusing, or challenging learning situation or has to face disappointment, failure, or misfortune.

When Okonkwo's I-position as a strong and masculine man dominates, and rigidly takes control of the other I-positions, Okonkwo feels blocked in a single I-position, and, at the end, he turns out to have a monological self that is rigidly governed by one voice, (I-as-a-strong leader) which leads to failure to establish a comprehensive dialogical relation with others. His decision to kill himself represents a shifting relationship between two voices – a central voice representing violence and strength and an undesirable voice representing emotion and compliance to the change that is going in his society. The compromising part in his self appears less integrated in Okonkwo's self as he struggles with finding a balance between fighting the white colonizers and finding deeper meaning and purpose in life.

CONCLUSION

Hubert Hermans' theory of the dialogical self has been a useful framework for understanding the actions of the protagonist of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo. Putting Okonkwo under the scrutiny of Hermans' theory reveals how he, in his relations with other people, invokes different internal and external I-positions, where different people evoke different parts in his self. For example, his masculine I-position swings between different internal and external I-positions, where he can provide each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established.

Unfortunately, Okonkwo's masculine I-position does not seem to leave much room for a more dialogical approach to the process of becoming an emotional father.

In other words, Okonkwo's I-position as a masculine violent leader reacts to the previously voiced I-positions as a father and an emotional human in a conflicting way. In the process of becoming an emotional man, Okonkwo's masculine I-position causes conflict within the self, and it grows overly dominant in other situations. This masculine I-position that appears to grow more noticeable and pronounced in the self over time indicates Okonkwo's difficulty in adjusting to the subtle change that is going through his society. Unlike his friend, Obierika, who can hold balance between his two internal I-positions, Okonkwo fails to hold this balance and that leads to his death.

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