Akshara: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Literature and Language
ISSN: 0975-5373
Number 14, May 2022, pp. 92-102
Edited by Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.waor.org/

Maslow's Theory and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the validity of Maslow's theory to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Using the tragic hero, Okonkwo, as a case in point, it is seen that Okonkwo fulfils the lower levels of Maslow hierarchy of needs, excluding the apex level. Specifically, Maslow's hierarchy of needs comprises five: physiological needs, security needs, social needs, self-esteem needs and self-actualisation needs. A critical reading of Achebe's novel reveals that Okonkwo fulfils the lower level needs. Okonkwo is unable to fulfil the needs of self-actualization in that he commits suicide. In this sense the tragic hero is not self-actualised because he finds it impossible to wipe out colonialism.

Keywords: Maslow's Theory, Achebe, Okonkwo, self-actualization needs, colonialism

I. Introduction

This study is based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow is of the view that man has a number of needs which could be arranged hierarchically. The paper attempts to show that a thorough grasp of Maslowian theory is useful in assisting the reader or critic to develop a better critique of Okonkwo, the tragic hero of Achebe's novel. Maslow is a famous American psychologist and his theory of needs is contained in his book *Motivation and Personality* (1954).

O. J. Offiong summarises Maslowian theory as follows:

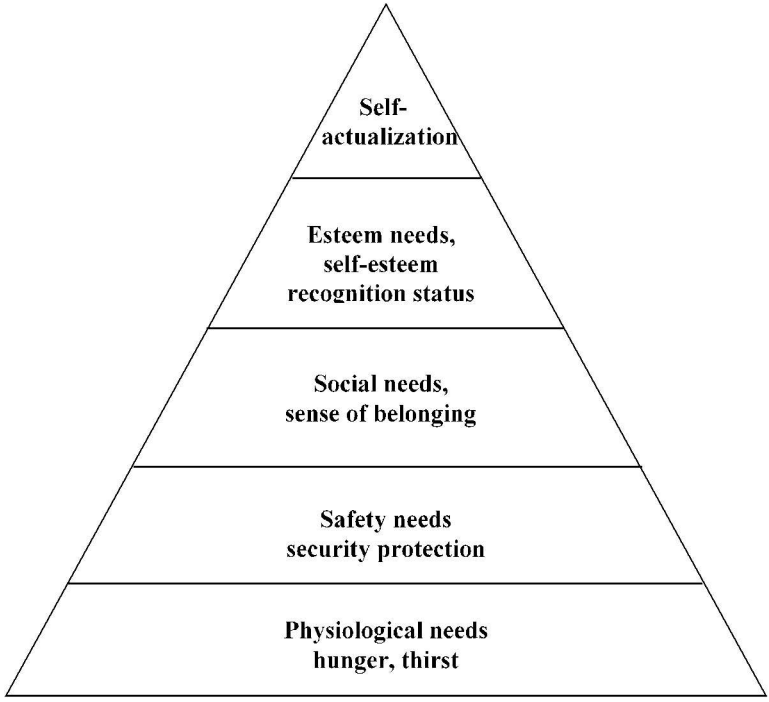
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> Man is a wanting being, there are always some needs he wants to satisfy. Once a particular need is accomplished, that particular need no longer motivates the individual and so he or she turns to another need with the hope of attaining satisfaction in that need (37).

In other words man has a hierarchy of needs in which each level has to be satisfied before he can proceed to another level. Every individual or worker has different kinds of needs that must be satisfied in sequence. As the individual accomplishes one level, he or she aspires towards satisfying the needs of the next higher level.

Maslow's theory is reproduced diagrammatically thus:



Source: Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*

Maslow identifies five significant needs in a hierarchical order which he thinks are applicable universally. They are: physiological needs, security needs, social needs, ego needs and self-actualization needs.

The physiological need is the foundation of all needs. Examples of these are food, clothing, shelter, sleep, water, air and sexual satisfaction. While safety needs is the second in Maslow's hierarchy; this appears after the physiological needs have been met. Social needs are the third level of need in Maslowian hierarchy. This simply comprises man's social nature to interact with others. The need for friendship and affection for one another emerges after the physiological and safety needs have been satisfied. Moreover, the fourth one is esteem needs which is also known as ego needs; it comprises the needs which people have for self-esteem and

self-respect. Self actualization is at the apex of Maslowian theory. Maslow himself defines this as the "desire to become more and more what idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming" (46). Self-actualization refers to the individual's need to realize his full potential and ambition. It implies becoming what one aims at becoming. This is a permanent need because one does not move to a higher need but continues to be motivated to actualize this need.

It is necessary to note that Maslow never conceived that a need must be satisfied one hundred per cent before an individual could proceed to the next level. He says that:

> In actual fact, most member of our society who are normal are partially satisfied in all their basic needs and partially unsatisfied in all their basic needs at the same time… it is as if the average citizen is satisfied perhaps 85 per cent in his physiological needs, 70 per cent in his safety needs, 50 per cent in his love needs, 40 per cent in his self-esteem needs, and 10 per cent in his self-actualization needs. (Maslow 388-389)

Man cannot be generally said to be completely satisfied at any level of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. One cannot but agree with Maslow that satisfaction of each in the attainment of each need has the tendency of decreasing at different levels varying from man to man. Maslow's hierarchy of needs has been subjected to critical criticisms. In spite of this, it is worthwhile to acknowledge its important contribution to the literature of motivation. His theory can be regarded as an ambitious attempt at a theory of human motivation.

This study attempts to apply Maslowian theory of needs to the classic novel *Things Fall Apart*. Following the Maslowian concept, one sees that the world of Achebe's novel is suffused with hierarchy of needs. In particular, one notices Okonkwo of Umuofia moving from one level to the next higher level. To a reasonable extent, the study shows Okonkwo satisfying the Maslowian hierarchy of needs.

II. Review of Criticism

Literary scholars have written extensively on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The novel has been viewed from different perspectives. Donald Weinstock, for instance, concentrates on the theme of Achebe's Christ-figure (56-65). Another critic, Francis Ngwaba sees complementary duality as a method of characterization in Achebe's novels (367-378). Ifeyinwa Okolo perceives Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a sexually explicit novel (125-126). Besides, Olabisi Ayodele discusses the issue of adjudication system in the novel (186-196). While, Charles Nnolim has shown that folktale is used extensively and functionally in Achebe's novels (16-27). M. J. C. Echeruo is concerned with the double-barrelled nature of Achebe's novels (150-163). One of the significant aspects of Achebe's novels according to R. N. Egudu is the skilful infusion of anecdotes (43-53). While Damian Opata shows that Okonkwo cannot be held responsible for committing any crime against Ikemefuna (71-79).

On her part, Sophia Akhuemokhan thinks that "Okonkwo is not so much a tragic figure as a revolutionary character" (89).

However, this present study looks at the novel henceforth *TFA* from the Maslowian point of view. It will be shown that Okonkwo fulfils physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and is unable to meet the self-actualization needs.

III. Physiological Needs

A careful reading of the novel shows Okonkwo fulfilling his physiological needs. One notices Okonkwo as well as members of his nuclear family living above subsistence level. He is portrayed as a fiercely ambitious young farmer. In the first few pages of the novel, Okonkwo is introduced as "a wealthy farmer," who has "two barns full of yams" (*TFA* 7). For this very fact, he emerges as a farmer of rare accomplishments. In addition to this, the author reveals that Okonkwo has "just married his third wife" (*TFA* 7). Thus, the hero is portrayed as a character who strives to accomplish his goals within the context of his utmost ability.

Okonkwo is no doubt one of the characters of Achebe who is determined to make a success of farming. Much effort has gone into making his home a success and there is much to show for all his efforts: "Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household. He has a large compound enclosed by a thick wall of red earth. Each of his three wives had her own hut" (*TFA* 12).

Apart from being a young man of impressive agricultural attainment, he is also portrayed as a successful polygamist. Okonkwo has not only provided food for his family, he has also ensured that each of the wives lives in a separate hut. Against the backdrop of physiological needs it cannot be disputed that Okonkwo has fulfilled the basic needs of food, shelter, and sexual satisfaction. The fact remains that at the domestic sphere Okonkwo has achieved a high level of success. It is true that it is not easy to maintain even a single wife, but Okonkwo has made a concerted effort to keep his three wives traditionally, physically and physiologically. Each of the three women has visible means of subsistence.

Achebe's strategy throughout the novel is to constantly convey Okonkwo as a hard-working man. The novelist wins us over by this mode of presenting the hero of the novel. This perspective is corroborated as follows: "During the planting season Okonkwo worked daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost. He was a very strong man and rarely felt fatigue" (*TFA* 11).

Achebe uses this character to paint a grim but realistic picture of a man who struggles to ensure his survival and that of his immediate family. He feels fulfilled as a farmer and also as a responsible husband and father. No doubt, he is successful as a farmer; he is successful as a husband and caring father. One cannot but say that to a large extent, Okonkwo has fulfilled the first requirement in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is that man makes every effort to meet physiological responsibilities.

On the issue of physiological achievement, Ernest Emenyonu notes that Okonkwo "assiduously" cultivated "the energetic and aggressive qualities which tend to be the most admired in Umuofia" (114). The critic sees Okonkwo as a man of many branches – strong, masculine and comprises action. Ironically the man, Okonkwo has begun "life with nothing, but soon gets over the rough beginnings" (114) and becomes a man of position in his clan. Okonkwo cherishes hard work and his ambition to survive and live up to expectations "becomes a blinding passion where nothing and nobody else counts" (114).

IV. Security/Safety Needs

In line with the Maslowian notion of security needs, Okonkwo shows concern for the safety of his household. This study among other things reveals that Okonkwo is desirous of preventing his wives and children from any danger or harm. Traditionally, one of the best times to offer such prayers is the New Yam festival. As the novel progresses, one realizes that the festival offers "an occasion for giving thanks to *Ani*, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility" (*TFA* 29). It is believed that *Ani* plays much more part in the life of the people than any other god.

Okonkwo's quest for security or safety needs is brought in subtly by the novelist. It goes this way: "in spite of the incident, the New Yam Festival was celebrated with great joy in Okonkwo household. Early that morning as he offered a sacrifice of new yam, and palm-oil to his ancestors he asked them to protect him, his children and their mothers in the New Year" (*TFA* 31). It is pertinent to point out that the 'incident' refers to Okonkwo's attempted murder of Ekwefi, his Second wife. He cannot but thank his "ancestors" for preventing such a tragic phenomenon and many others. It is not far from the truth that Okonkwo and a number of the villagers engage in ancestral worship for the purposes of fulfilling their security needs.

A scholar of African Traditional Religion, Imasogie Osadolor, has classified African ancestral worship into three categories (40-41). The first category of ancestors is the "apotheosized heroes". These heroes represent the spirits of few members of the clan who because of the prowess have been raised to the level of divinities; while the second category of worship is known as "ghost worshipping". They are those ancestors, who due to time factor, can no longer be traced to particular families. The third category of ancestral worship is that linked with the spirits of the departed members of the family unit. Judging by Osadolor's categories, one cannot but say that the "ancestors" in the context of the novel are a combination of the three categories. In this connection, one could say with some confidence that Okonkwo seeks protection from a number of "apotheosized heroes", "ghost" ancestors and the departed members of his immediate family. This is corroborated by Bolaji Idowu who says that in African traditional perspective, "communion and communication are possible between those who are alive on earth and the deceased and that the latter have the power to influence, help or molest the former" (179).

Little wonder, then, that Okonkwo indulges in ancestor-worship; he places his life under the care and protection of ancestral spirits. This is an overt acknowledgment of the spiritual reality as well as a desire to commune with the ancestors. He also calls on the ancestral spirits to guide and guard his wife and children. Okonkwo thus places all his fears and insecurities under the protective custody of the departed spirits. By so doing, he consciously and deliberately seeks to fulfil safety or security needs.

V. Social Needs

One thing, of which there is hardly any doubt, is Okonkwo's fulfillment of social needs. One such occasion is the social get-together at Mbanta. Okonkwo feels honour bound to appreciate the good gesture of his mother's kinsmen. In particular, he feels very appreciative of all the support given to him by Uchendu, the eldest surviving member of his maternal family. It gives Okonkwo great pleasure to organize a family get-together on the eve of his departure from Mbanta. He decides to socialize with his maternal uncles, nephews, nieces, aunties and cousins. Okonkwo ensures this party is held in honour of their hospitality to him and his immediate family members.

Our concern is not so much the issue of a get-together as with the way and manner he organizes the party. In this regard it is pointed out that "Okonkwo never did things by halves" (*TFA* 132). Even when Ekwefi advises him on the need to slaughter two goats, Okonkwo replies thus: "I am calling a feast because I have the wherewithal. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. My mother's people have been good to me and I must show my gratitude" (*TFA* 132). The keyword here is "feast". There is a discrepancy between Okonkwo's perception of gratitude and the way Ekwefi, his wife perceives it. At a conservative estimate, Ekwefi proposes "two goats" for the occasion. This is at variance with Okonkwo's estimate. The truth of the matter is that while Ekwefi thinks of the party as a token of appreciation, Okonkwo toys with the idea of organizing a "feast". Moreover, while Ekwefi thinks of partying with Okonkwo's maternal family alone, it is implied that Okonkwo wishes to throw a party for his maternal family and the entire Mbanta community. This could be responsible for the use of the word "feast" in this context. It is this phenomenon as James Zanden sees "the height of socialization in which a biological organism becomes transformed into a person – a genuine social being" (68).

It gives Okonkwo profound joy to organize this lavish farewell party at Mbanta. From available evidence, the celebrant must have slaughtered "three goats and a number of fowls". In addition he has lavishly provided "fofo and yam pottage, egusi soup and bitter leaf soup and pots and pots of palm-wine" (*TFA* 132). It cannot be denied that Okonkwo has behaved in a socially acceptable way. A great many readers would commend him for fulfilling his social obligations or needs. Okonkwo

himself in his valedictory speech admits that "it is good for kinsmen to meet" (*TFA* 133). In other words, he has done this lavish get-together both as a mark of appreciation as well as to strengthen the bond of kinship. What is remarkable here is Okonkwo's determination to fulfil his social needs; and it tallies with the third level of Maslowian hierarchy of needs.

VI. Self-Esteem

Achebe's novel is held together by Okonkwo's quest for self-esteem. One of the first things we become conscious of concerning Okonkwo is his wrestling abilities. It is not accidental that the novel begins thus: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond" (*TFA* 3). The opening sentences of the novel make much of Okonkwo's status. Achebe's method of presenting Okonkwo is worthy of note. One is compelled to reflect on Diana Kendall's distinction between achieved status and ascribed status. In the opinion of Kendall "an ascribed status is a social position conferred at birth or received involuntarily… an achieved status is a social position a person assumes voluntarily as a result of personal choice, merit, or direct effort" (117). More often than not Okonkwo is presented as someone who is questing for "solid personal achievements" (*TFA* 3).

From page to page Okonkwo is seen questing for fame and fortune. One of his claims to self-esteem is his defeat of Amalinze, the hitherto great wrestler. As a result, Okonkwo's fame has "grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (*TFA* 3). There is, in addition, another point to make concerning his warrior-like attitude:

> In Umuofia 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. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head (*TFA* 9).

Even a cursory reader of the novel will have no difficulty in realizing Okonkwo's quest for self-esteem. From the above quotation it is a common knowledge that Okonkwo consciously strives to accomplish more than others in Umuofia. As a rule, the quest for prestige lay at the heart of virtually every activity of his. No doubt he is a man of extraordinary abilities. For Okonkwo to be seen parading human skull is ludicrous as well as egomaniac. One is completely taken aback by his action. This episode alone is enough to send shivers up and down the reader's spine. Ironically Okonkwo sees it as an opportunity to showcase his prowess, prestige and self-esteem.

Besides, to appreciate fully the extent of Okonkwo's flair for self-esteem, one must mention the tragic death of Ikemefuna. Although Ikemefuna calls and sees Okonkwo as his father, it is sad to note that he decides to kill Ikemefuna because he does not want to be seen as "weak" (*TFA* 49). Okonkwo's reason for this dastardly

act is as callous as it is egoistic. It could be seen as the height of human egoism. It is shocking that he has to take the life of the little boy to boost his ego. Here he emerges as one who is ready to sacrifice anything for the purposes of self-esteem.

Achebe uses the stream of consciousness technique to heighten Okonkwo's quest for self-esteem. This is portrayed after the death of Ikemefuna as follows:

> When did you become a shivering old woman, Okonkwo asked himself, you who is known in all the nine villages for your valour in war? Now 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 (*TFA* 51).

Here the strength of the novel is dependent heavily on the way Achebe explores the innermost recesses of the mind to evoke Okonkwo's feelings of self-esteem. By using this mode of expression, no one is left in doubt about Okonkwo's deepest notion about himself and how he sees other people. In fact he sees less successful villagers and men as women.

Commenting on the greatness of Okonkwo, Kester Echenim shows how he enjoys the support and respect of his peers and foes alike. But more significantly, he enjoys the support and blessings of the gods: "From the outset, Okonkwo is introduced as an exceptional being chosen by the gods to accomplish extraordinary feats" (2). Furthermore, Echenim points out the hero-like physique of Okonkwo, the presentation of Okonkwo especially in the first page of the novel "situates Okonkwo on a plane that enhances his stature and gives him a heroic dimension" (2). To some extent, Okonkwo emerges as a privileged member of society and as a potentially worthy defender of traditional values and norms. On a similar note, Gerald Moore focuses on Okonkwo's quest for prestige and self-esteem. His obsession with self-dignity is captured by Moore as follows:

> Okonkwo is a real Ibo man, utterly convincing in his character and reactions. He is virile, proud and fearless, with a personal dignity…. At the same time he is obsessed with the idea of status with the clan and he spares neither himself nor his family in pursuit of it. (60)

From the perspective of Moore, the reason for Okonkwo's quest for prestige is obvious. This is itself an over-compensation or cover up for his father's failure, a flute-playing idler and loafer. Okonkwo is also hard on his eldest son in order to wipe out the symptoms of Unoka's weakness. Eustace Palmer, another critic of this novel, thinks that Okonkwo's quest for prestige has sociological and psychological undertones. Elaborating further on this, he tries to compare Thomas Hardy's novels with Achebe's. According to Palmer, *Things Fall Apart* is a novel of character and environment but in little different sense than Hardy's. It is revealed that in Hardy's novel a character's fate is dependent upon social circumstances. While in Achebe's case environment is character. Therefore, in the views of Palmer "Okonkwo is

what his society has made of him" (53). If he is obsessed with status, prestige and dignity, it is because his society (Umuofia) is preoccupied with rank and prestige. Palmer sums up thus: "Okonkwo is the personification of his society's values, and he is determined to succeed in the rat-race" (53). Viewed against this backdrop, Okonkwo's excessive struggle to fulfil esteem needs ceases to surprise any given reader of the narrative.

VII. Self-actualization

Self-actualization is at the apex of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and differs from one person to another. In the context of the novel, one notices that Okonkwo's highest desire is to wipe out western colonialism from Umuofia and other neighbouring villages. With a deep sense of nostalgia, Okonkwo reflects on the "good old days again, when a warrior was a warrior" (*TFA* 153). He feels desirous that the white men should be stamped out of the entire clan. Okonkwo makes his position on the matter abundantly clear: "if a man comes into my house and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head" (*TFA* 127). One can cite several instances of Okonkwo's protest against colonialism; it is found all over the novel.

However, it never ceases to amaze Okonkwo that Christianity and western culture have gone deep into the fabrics of the clan. He finds it offensive that the "new religion and government and the trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds" (*TFA* 145). Consequently, Okonkwo is seen from time to time trying to actualize the elimination of western hegemony. As a matter of fact, the issue of colonialism becomes highly pervading and Okonkwo's overriding ambition is to put a stop to it. This determination to get rid of the white men and their authority comprise the highest in Okonkwo's hierarchy of needs.

Although Okonkwo is a man of great accomplishments, he begins to realize that his burning ambition may be unachievable. The Whiteman have achieved very much in entrenching their culture as well as religion. Surprisingly enough, the white men now have black collaborators. Obierika laments thus: "our men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government" (*TFA* 141).

The novel abounds with a number of events concerning western dominion and domination. Unfortunately, Okonkwo's personal ambition to eradicate imported cultural and religious ideas continues to yield little or no success. The best course of action in this circumstance is to commit suicide. Obierika in a dialogue with the District Commissioner declares thus: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog" (*TFA* 165). Obierika has actually made one of the most tragic statements in the novel. Achebe could have perhaps written a more interesting novel if Okonkwo has

actualized his dream of wiping out colonial manifestations. The act of suicide alone is enough to negate all other of his achievements. It is a thing of irony that Okonkwo who has always often made much of his achieved status is going to be buried like an animal. In this sense *Things Fall Apart* is held together by numerous strands of irony of fate; this points to the artistic depth and strength of the novel.

VIII. Conclusion

In assessing Achebe's novel, one cannot accept Maslowian theory wholesale. To a very large extent, it has been demonstrated that Okonkwo fulfils a number of physiological needs. Besides, he has been able to satisfy some of his social needs. Abundant clues from the novel show that he has taken care of security needs. There are continuous references to demonstrate his quest and acquisition of self-esteem. Therefore, he has fulfilled Maslowian hierarchy of needs such as physiological, security, social and ego needs. But Okonkwo is unable to fulfil the self-actualization needs.

One could say that Okonkwo is not self-actualised. He fulfils other needs excepting the eradication of colonialism. In that case, all other Maslowian needs are satisfied, excluding self-actualization. Okonkwo has been able to climb up the ladder to the fourth step, but he falls off the ladder and finds it difficult to get to the apex. Despite the fact that Okonkwo is unable to get to the level of self-actualization, the value of Maslow's theory cannot be ignored. The tragic hero, Okonkwo, meets other needs to a reasonable extent. He achieves a high level of success, especially in providing for and securing his immediate household and extended family. With the notable exception of failing to actualize the eradication of foreign culture, religion and mode of governance, Okonkwo satisfies Maslowian's lower levels of needs and climbs up to a reasonable level.

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