

# Dissent in *Things Fall Apart*: The Case of Okonkwo

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## Abstract

Widely read and discussed author Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) has created dissent in Okonkwo out of the cultural clash between native African and traditional white culture of the archetypal colonialists — the British traders, missionaries and government officers — in his groundbreaking novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). From the very outset, Okonkwo is placed as an acute follower of his tribal customs and norms while dissenting against everything that disagrees with his Igbo heritage. This study aims to ascertain the route of a dissenter by rationalizing Okonkwo's suicide as an act of ultimate rebellion to remind his people of their traditions and to inspire resistance in the face of impending colonization. The study intends to show Achebe's projection of Okonkwo as a gradual uprising dissenter, setting up other characters like Unoka, Nwoye, and Obierika and their deeds as a foil to Okonkwo. Through Okonkwo's resistance, the author insightfully claims that the fall in the title is not the fall of a dissenter, but the rise of an undying rebellious spirit who embraces death instead of accepting British subjugation.

*Things Fall Apart* is set in Igboland in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Igbos and other African territories experienced colonial penetration by the West Europeans. Achebe wrote it “to teach other Africans that their past was neither as savage nor as benighted as the colonizer represented it to be” (Okpewho 172). The first two-thirds of the novel is the synchronic presentation of Umuofian culture and society, of which Okonkwo is a product. Okonkwo, an integral part of this society, has grown up embracing its norms, values, and outlook where “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered” (Achebe 6). Okonkwo had achieved reverence by revolting against every weakness, cowardly act, compromise, submissiveness, and passivity as it would lower both his status and that of his tribe. As a consequence, Okonkwo is acknowledged as a dissenter from beginning to end, even when no one supports him.

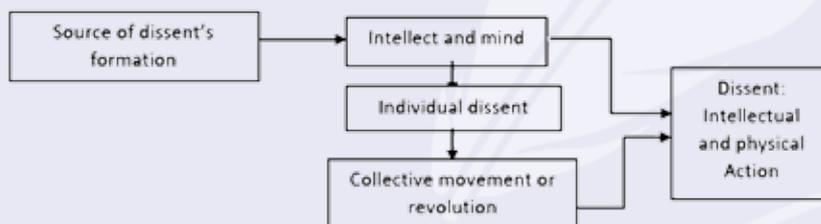
In most of the studies conducted on *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's end seems to be considered as not only his demise but also the fall of African culture. Articles by Rhoads, Foley, and Galvan have thrown light on the broken order of Igbo culture due to colonial confrontation and presented Okonkwo as a part of that collapse. Diana Akers Rhoads in her article “Cultures in *Things Fall Apart*” analyzes British and African culture side by side. Rhoads aims at revealing Achebe's intention to depict Africa's past truthfully. She analyzes Igbo religion and government systems along with their flaws, reaching a conclusion that these are not flawed enough to be replaced with the British system. In case of Okonkwo, Rhoads thinks that both Okonkwo's flawed character and unjust British system are responsible for his destructive and tragic end. Okonkwo's suicide is viewed as the final surrender of Umuofia by Enrique Galvan and Fernando Galvan in their article “God(s) Fall(s) Apart: Christianity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.” This study shows how Ibo culture is undermined, due to Umuofia's inclination for a new religion, not for the loss of their belief in their own religions.

Okonkwo's suicide is the outcome of the European dominion under the mask of a civilizing and a Christian mission. Andrew Foley's article "Okonkwo's Fate and the Worldview of *Things Fall Apart*" shows Okonkwo as a tragic figure whose downfall occurred due to his tragic flaws. He identifies Okonkwo's inflexibility to adapt to the new rules as his tragic flaw, and Okonkwo's pride and ambition as his hubris. On the other hand, studies by Friesen, Iyasere, and many others have contributed to uphold Okonkwo and his actions in a positive light, but Okonkwo as a dissenter never crosses their minds. Solomon O. Iyasere's article "Narrative Techniques in *Things Fall Apart*" illustrates Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna not as a brutal act but one that shows his sentimental reactions. Okonkwo's flaws are viewed from different perspectives. Alan R. Friesen in "Okonkwo's Suicide as an Affirmative Act: Do Things Really Fall Apart?" demonstrates Okonkwo's suicide not as the result of a failure to adjust to a new worldview, but as an act of rebellion designed to remind his people of their traditions in the face of colonization. This act has empowered Okonkwo instead of making him a powerless and passive character.

The observation of Okonkwo as a dissenter has received little attention in postcolonial studies. Okonkwo's ideas of his own worth and masculinity, reactionary attitude towards his sluggish father and son have never been seen as the radical spirit of a dissenter. Okonkwo's suicide has never been seen as a part of his dissent before. Hence, this study focuses on the central character Okonkwo and his reciprocal affiliation with Igbo society to show how he is not a disciple but a dissenter.

The nature and definition of dissent have changed with time. Historically, dissent indicates the English religious dissenters of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries who separated from the Church of England. But the nature of dissent has been broadened to include secular issues in its concept. Dissent may simply indicate "disagreement with or difference of opinion from the prevailing position" (Mitra 5). Frederick C. Giffin and Ronald D. Smith, in their preface to the volume *Against the Grain*, define dissent as an "opposition to the status quo" (Mitra 5). To them, dissent means opposing the present existing state of affairs as it denies one's own convictions and principles.

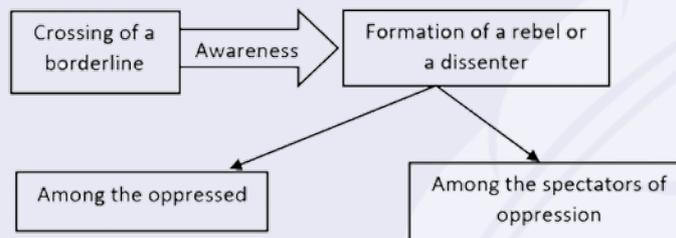
Dissent may include both intellectual and physical actions. The notion of dissent firstly takes birth in the mind. Then it is nourished in an individual's conscience. This individual awakening may form opposition alone without waiting for others. But when it requires physical resistance or broader movement, organized followers or united thought are needed and thus "dissent may lead to reform movements and even revolution" (Mitra 6-7). This process can be articulated through the following theoretical framework:



Albert Camus' *The Rebel: An Essay on Man* terms a "dissenter" as a "rebel," since it has been a convenient synonym. Camus acknowledges dissent as one of the essential dimensions of mankind because it is a question of preserving one's own existence as "I rebel — therefore we exist" (Camus 15). Accordingly, Camus' rebel "is an individual who refuses to obey an oppressive authority ... in defense of his own rights" in order to retain freedom and justice (Mitra 7-8).

An individual defends himself when the oppressive authority is about to cross a borderline, as "there is a limit beyond which you shall not go" (Camus). If the authority crosses the borderline of tolerance through injustices and torture, oppressed people cannot bear humiliation. At this moment, the seed of rebellion blooms in "a feeling of revulsion" (Camus 10) and the individual understands his own worth and right: "In every act of rebellion, the rebel simultaneously experiences a feeling of revulsion at the infringement of his rights and a complete and spontaneous loyalty to certain aspects of himself" (Camus 10). Moreover, Camus claims that rebellion does not arise only and necessarily among the oppressed, it can also be caused by the mere spectacle of oppression of which someone else is the victim. Camus gives an example of Russian terrorists in Siberia who committed suicide to protest against the whipping of their comrades. This kind of sentiment is called human solidarity that forms an awareness in a rebel's mind, discarding any space to be a disciple: "Awareness, no matter how confused it may be, develops from every act of rebellion: the sudden, dazzling perception that there is something in man with which he can identify himself, even if only for a moment" (Camus 11).

Silence, on the other hand, indicates one's lack of want and opinions making one an adherent to ongoing injustices. But a rebel or dissenter cannot be a follower as he or she has egoistic motives: "Moreover, the rebel — once he has accepted the motives and at the moment of his greatest impetus — preserves nothing in that he risks everything. He demands respect for himself, of course, but only in so far as he identifies himself with a natural community" (Camus 12). Camus' view on dissent can be structured in this way:



Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* emerges as an individual dissenter who starts to rebel against his father, Unoka, and develops gradually, gaining momentum from events like Nwoye's conversion and the sacrilegious deeds of the convert Enoch, leading him to revolt ultimately against the Christian missionaries and the government agents. Okonkwo gains awareness by being a spectator of oppression in his exile and being a victim of the head messenger's

oppression. However, Camus' notion of crossing the borderline can be applied here. The borderline of tolerance is crossed when Okonkwo and other leaders are physically assaulted by the District Commissioner and head messenger. This culminates in the killing of the messenger and Okonkwo's suicide, projected as the latter's physical resistance. Thus Okonkwo appears as an absolute and solitary dissenter who can even stand alone in the battle for existence.

Okonkwo's rebellion is indissolubly bound to the traditional values and institutions of Umuofian culture. He is proud of his accomplishments in life and of his being an Igbo authority figure. He has multiple wives and children as it is practiced in their culture. He has earned the respect of the villagers through his strength in battles. The novel's opening gives an image of the hero as an archetypal wrestler and leader: "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat" (3). Killam regards Okonkwo as "one of the greatest men of his time, the embodiment of Ibo values, the man who better than most symbolizes his race" (qtd. in Iyasere 178). This statement reveals the pre-colonial harmony of the society and Okonkwo's ability to bring order by fighting against chaos. It also suggests Okonkwo's ability "to establish a civilization without the help of the European civilizing mission" (Chidi 85). Their ancestral heroes are strong enough. Their cultural records are rich enough. Any kind of outer influence is not sought after. Unfortunately, though Okonkwo's society is culture-conscious, it is vulnerable to acculturation as is seen in the third part of the story.

Okonkwo belongs to a society where there is a hierarchy in the socio-political organization as represented by the following pyramid:



*The Igbo social classes (qtd. in Ndiaye 17)*

Despite the hierarchy, democracy is practiced in this organization. In this democratic process, decisions are taken in a legislative assembly. Sometimes open-air meetings are held where everyone is free to give their opinions. In the novel, Achebe states, "So if the community says we will have a meeting tomorrow ... everyday ... could go there. And everybody could speak" (Ndiaye 18). The pyramid shows that there is no king. The same scenario is found in the novel when the villagers answer the missionaries: "They asked who the king of the village was, but the villagers told them there was no king. 'We have men of high title and the chief priest and the elders,' they said" (105).

As an influential leader and decision-maker, Okonkwo earns two of the four titles. He is also a member of the masked "egwugwu," a secret society, who settle disputes that cannot be resolved in other ways. Social dispute is not resolved by means of war all the time, but rather, compensatory offering is considered a better option. The same happens in the conflict

between Umuofia and Mbaino, where Okonkwo is chosen by the nine villages as an emissary. Electing Okonkwo as an emissary reveals the terrifying image he projects across the tribes and “He was treated with great honor and respect” for it (9).

As a highly respected Umuofian, Okonkwo is asked to look after a young boy called Ikemefuna, who is brought from Mbaino as compensation. Occasionally, orders or decisions are given by the Igbo Oracle. These are feared and obeyed by the people of Umuofia on all terms. Okonkwo is a strict adherent of these oracles. When Okonkwo’s adopted son Ikemefuna is sentenced to death by the Oracle, he murders Ikemefuna on his own to prove himself a disciple to the Igbo norms and values. He did it to “prove the fidelity to the oracle” and placed “divine authority above personal sentiment” (Kortenaar 47). Ezeudu, the respected elder of the clan, considers it a crime as Okonkwo is not ordered to carry out the deed — “Yes, Umuofia has decided to kill him. The Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has pronounced it. They will take him outside Umuofia as is the custom, and kill him there. But I want you to have nothing to do with it. He calls you his father” (40). In spite of this warning, Okonkwo “drew his matchet and cut him down” (43).

According to Basak, this crime is committed out of “Okonkwo’s pride and ambition of reaching the peak of social hierarchy” (18), not out of loyalty. It is “an act of murder, not an act of sacrifice” (Njeng 4). But there is no option for Okonkwo except to kill Ikemefuna. Being one of the leaders, he must go to the execution. Okonkwo’s attitude becomes more evident when he scolds Obierika: “You sound as if you question the authority and the decision of the Oracle ... But someone had to do it” (46). So, Okonkwo could either save Ikemefuna or hand him back to be killed when he runs towards him crying, “My father, they have killed me!” (43). The former stance would be against the Oracle while the latter would be being neutral. This neutral position is articulated by Okonkwo’s friend Obierika’s comment — “if the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it” (47). It indicates a situation where one would not do the morally conflicting deed, but not prevent others from doing it. Okonkwo, of course, cannot be neutral and so he kills Ikemefuna himself. The aftereffects, however, are interesting. Okonkwo is found “brooding over this violent deed for three full days” (Iyasere 185). Therefore, the homicide proves Okonkwo as neither a brutal nor an egocentric person but rather a victim of circumstance. Okonkwo, torn between his devotion to ancestral principles and private emotion, ultimately proves himself a stern disciple of the Oracle as well as Igbo norms, obeying the Oracle without a second thought. Okonkwo’s unquestionable loyalty sets him apart from Obierika who is a consistent critic of tradition. He questions the will of the goddess in excluding Okonkwo from society for seven years because of an accidental killing at Ezeudu’s funeral: “Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently?” (88). He also questions the legacy of throwing away twin children. On the other hand, Okonkwo obeys all the punishments decreed against him. His animals are slaughtered and his property is destroyed by his clansmen.

The Umuofian community, including Okonkwo, cherish courage and manhood above everything. Due to this, he hates all persons lacking manliness, including even his father,

Unoka, and his son, Nwoye. Umuofia emphasizes personal worth and achievement, and Okonkwo is living proof of this as “he had won fame as the greatest wrestler... [was] a wealthy farmer and had two barns of yams ... two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars” (6). From the above, Okonkwo can be seen as the ideal Igbo man. Being an ardent follower of ancestral and cultural values, he rebels against the ignominies done by others. Okonkwo’s life is reciprocally related to Igbo society as earlier discussed. Okonkwo’s utmost effort to hold Umuofia above everything, determines him as a disciple to Igbo values and norms. It also ascertains Okonkwo’s life-long dissent against everything that might tarnish the honor of Igboland.

The seed of dissent is sown first in his mind. For Okonkwo, it originates with the hatred that he feels towards his indolent father, Unoka, as Okonkwo has no tolerance for the unsuccessful man who “was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back” (4). The beginning of dissent is evident too when the narrator reports, “Even as a little boy he had resented his father’s failure and weakness” (10). Being effeminate and possessing no title, Unoka was considered an “agbala” in Umuofian terms. It affected Okonkwo’s mind and infected his soul with the fear of becoming another Unoka. So Okonkwo kept himself aloof from any sort of emotion except the emotion of anger. The only emotion worth demonstrating was strength, since affection was a sign of weakness and “[h]is whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness” (9). Thus, his life-long dissent was in progress because he “was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved ... gentleness and ... idleness” (10). These things motivated him to become hardworking. This subsequently led to Okonkwo’s response in killing Ikemefuna. Since he was a dissenter against weakness, affection, and a devotee of the manly valor that Umuofia esteemed, he ignored Ezeudu’s advice and Obierika’s wisdom.

The root of Okonkwo’s dissent goes deeper through his son, Nwoye, who resembles Unoka. Nwoye lacks masculinity and Okonkwo struggles to teach him how to be a proud, stoic, and unemotional man, qualities that he values. Okonkwo says, “I have done my best to make Nwoye grow into a man, but there is too much of his mother in him” (Achebe 46). He adds, “Too much of his grandfather” (46). This creates a huge gap in the father-son relationship which later becomes intense due to the effect of Ikemefuna’s death on Nwoye. Okonkwo is furious when Nwoye converts to Christianity, being influenced by the missionary activities. It is unbearable for him that his own son not only proves himself an “agbala,” but is also defiant of tradition. He could not understand how “living fire begets cold, impotent ash” (109). Like a “[r]oaring flame” (108), Nwoye should have proved himself a deserving successor and keeper of Igbo values. Hearing about Nwoye’s visit to the church, Okonkwo beats him with a heavy stick. This is symbolic of Okonkwo’s retaliation against the missionaries and, in turn, the British colonizer as well as the converts.

Nwoye’s conversion is the striking moment. The white men have not crossed Okonkwo or slighted his honor before, but Nwoye’s betrayal of his own religion as well as community heralds Okonkwo’s defeat. Okonkwo has only heard about the destructive activities done by

the whites in other territories. He never experienced it directly. With his son's conversion, Okonkwo is no longer a spectator or aggressor. Rather he becomes one of the oppressed. This suggests how oppression starts to cross the borderline of tolerance about which Camus wrote in *The Rebel*. Like Camus' Rebel, Okonkwo too physically revolts when repression goes beyond that borderline. And the borderline is crossed at the moment when the Umuofian leaders, including Okonkwo, are humiliated by the British colonizers.

Returning home from exile, Okonkwo found a different Umuofia where a new government had been established with a District Commissioner and court messengers. He was shocked at the changing view of Africans who had begun to follow the white men's ideology, considering others as uncivilized and lesser beings. Respected Umuofian clansmen were in prison for disobeying British law. This miserable collapse of his clan led Okonkwo to question Obierika, "Why have they lost the power to fight?" (124). In reply, Obierika reminds him of the havoc wreaked by the whites out of revenge, as people of Abame killed one white man. Okonkwo reacts by denouncing the Abame people as "weak and foolish." They should have fought back: "Had they no guns and matchets?" (124). As Abame was always considered cowardly in comparison with Umuofia, Okonkwo does not expect to remain passive like them. He makes up his mind to rebel: "We must fight these men and drive them from the land" (124). Okonkwo's determination is initially successful when they go to burn the church together. After this revolt, "Okonkwo was almost happy" (136). This was similar to Mitra's notion of revolution as Umuofians were united at a single point of thought. This resolution was to protest the ignominy that Enoch, an overzealous convert, had done by unmasking an "egwuwu" in public and by eating a sacred python, sparking off a conflict between the church and the people. And Okonkwo would let no one get away with dishonoring Igbo customs.

The District Commissioner and the head messenger cross the borderline when Umuofian leaders including Okonkwo are called for a meeting after the burning of the church. This is a conspiracy and they are tricked into submission. Their hair is shaved off, they are hit with large sticks on the head and back, and fined. Choking with hatred, Okonkwo's mind is stimulated by a rebellious spirit. After the incident,

Okonkwo slept very little. The bitterness in his heart was now mixed with a kind of child-like excitement. Before he had gone to bed he had brought down his war dress, which he had not touched since his return from exile. He had shaken out his smoked raffia skirt and examined his tall feather head-gear and his shield. They were all satisfactory, he had thought. (141)

Okonkwo decides he would fight single-handedly and alone if others "chose to be cowards" (141).

Okonkwo indeed fights alone, as seen at the great assembly. Messengers of the court come to suspend the meeting and all men at the meeting become silent and passive. Okonkwo breaks the silence by drawing his matchet and beheading the court messenger. And in that moment, Okonkwo realizes the loss of unity among the Umuofians, and 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” (144-145). This broken unity reminds Okonkwo of the parting feast which he himself organized. Anxious to preserve his family’s heritage in the face of the colonizing missionaries, Okonkwo had said, “I have only called you together because it is good for kinsmen to meet” (117). Okonkwo mourned for the apparent loss of unity evident from his conversation with Obierika. He could not bear the change that had taken place in his Igbo culture and values. As Foley states, “The degree of social change may be measured by contrasting two great assemblies, which take place in the novel” (43). Earlier, Umuofia had decided over the inter-tribal dispute peacefully and jointly in the assembly where Okonkwo took the responsibility of a war emissary. The great assembly held after the humiliation of the leaders by the British commissioner and court messengers, however, presented a different scene. The presence of the clan was not satisfying as many former members “have broken the clan and gone their several ways” (144).

Okonkwo could not understand how an alien culture had done this as he questions Obierika, “Does the white man understand our custom about land?” (124). How could they when they did not even know the Igbo language? How could they claim that Igbo customs were bad and influence others with their view? Obierika’s speech perhaps explains why Okonkwo has to fight alone: “How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? The white man ... has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (124). But that fall was not for Okonkwo. Okonkwo dissented from accepting that fall like a one-man army. But, standing alone, he could neither drive the whites away nor remain an audience to the decline of his beloved Igbo culture. He thus decides to end his life to demonstrate his sheer hatred and defiance towards the “present status quo” (Mitra 5), to show his extreme dissent.

Alan R. Frieson’s study shows the possibility of the positive effects Okonkwo’s suicide might have on the Umuofian people. Okonkwo’s act would remind them of the customs they were throwing away. This may not achieve greater things but would force them to think about Okonkwo, once a great man: “The very act of remembering these values presents a powerful affront against the missionaries who encourage Umuofia to forget their culture and history” (Friesen 8-9). Okonkwo would rather sacrifice his rightful burial than do nothing. His passivity could result in “total colonisation” or “lead to total annihilation” (Friesen 10).

Eric Sipyinyu Njeng’s study took a neutral stance showing both the positive and negative sides. Obierika explained Okonkwo’s suicide as an offence against the earth, an abomination. The Igbos considered those who committed suicide so despicable that they were not mourned and had to be buried by strangers. In accordance with this norm, Okonkwo descended “even lower than his father” (Njeng 4). Alternatively, Okonkwo’s suicide could be considered a kind of sacrifice, as he gave up the right to be enshrined along with his ancestors. Since death was the main end, he could allow himself to be killed. In that case, it would not be sacrifice, not even suicide itself. It would have added more ignominy to Okonkwo’s image. Emily Durkheim defined suicide thus: “Suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from positive or negative acts of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (qtd. in Keat and Urry 120). Okonkwo’s suicide was thus altruistic recalling Emile Durkheim’s notion of suicide:

Where the individual's life is rigorously governed by custom and habit, suicide is what he calls altruistic; that is, it results from the individual's taking his own life because of higher commandments, either those of religious sacrifice or unthinking political allegiance. (Durkheim 15)

The individual felt that something larger than himself was causing him to take his own life, such as religious or military martyrdom. Similarly, Okonkwo chose to take his life rather than live to see the traditions of his land desecrated. He died for something that was above the self.

Okonkwo's suicide was the brave act of a solitary dissenter who was always ready to give his life to protect his own ethics of manhood, pride, as well as his existence. He sacrificed his life to make others realize their mistake and turn back to their gods. Consequently, this was neither an act of shame nor a taboo. A sacrifice could not be the "fall" that the title of the novel suggests. Society might fall apart along with its values, but the spirit of a dissenter could never fall. A dissenter's image could never fade as Okonkwo was still valued as "one of the greatest men in Umuofia" (147) by Obierika in the last chapter. His undying spirit would seek a path to existence even in the world of *Things Fall Apart*. This view contrasts with Unoka's remark, "It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails *alone*" (18). In case of Okonkwo, it is more glorious and incredible when a man fights alone.

The study ends with justifying Okonkwo as a dissenter in relation to the above mentioned framework. Okonkwo is judged with respect to his relationship with other Igbo men like Unoka, Obierika, Nwoye as well as Igbo society as a whole. Okonkwo proves himself a disciple of the social values and norms as it is seen in events like Ikemefuna's death, his unquestioning obedience to the ordained punishments, and mostly in his attitude towards Igbo values. Okonkwo is also judged as a dissenter in the context of his actions like destruction of the church, killing of the messenger, and his own suicide. The destruction of the Christian missionary is evidence of collective movement, which is the sole instance of Umuofian unity after Okonkwo's exile. Afterwards, the unity of the clansmen is broken, as is wholly realized by Okonkwo in the Great Assembly where he killed the head messenger. He fought like a one-man army while others broke apart. Okonkwo's suicide is analyzed as his final physical resistance, since it is the best choice for him.

A dissenter initially revolts intellectually, developing a kind of awakened conscience in himself or herself. In the midst of that process comes the defending point when oppression crosses the limit and the oppressed people raise their voices and physically resist. It may take the form of a collective movement or a dissenter may even stand alone. The Umuofian community nourished both dissenters and disciples. Dissenters like Okonkwo were by no means influenced by the District Commissioner or the Christian missionary, rather they made his nationalistic spirit stronger. The practices and actions of British colonizers incited his rebellious spirit. The opposite was seen in Nwoye, Enoch, Unoka, and other characters. They could better be labelled as disciples, as they were indifferent to their own cultural heritage and submissive to the British oppression. Okonkwo's life-long battle as a dissenter was not only against outsiders, but also against his own clansmen who denied their own identity and thus endangered the existence of Igboland as a whole.

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