

Re-reading Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: A Postcolonial Perspective

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: October 02, 2018

Accepted: October 18, 2018

Published: November 30, 2018

Volume: 1

Issue: 4

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2018.1.4.1

KEYWORDS

Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart, Anglophone Tradition, Igbo Culture, White, Missionaries, Cultural Tension, Colonialism, Patriarchy, Failure.

Being a postcolonial narrative, *Things Fall Apart* experiences a wide critical acclaim. From the pen of Chinua Achebe, the Igbo cultural complexity has come into being a theme that opens up a historical account of the clash of two cultures. Okonkwo, a very well-known public figure in his community falls under the threat of a new culture brought by the white missionaries preaching the gospels of the Christianity. After the arrival of the Christian culture, the first collision that takes place is the division at the individual, and then at the societal levels. When a number of the Igbo people, including Okonkwo's son, change their religion, it creates chaos and confusions throughout the community. Although the Igbo people have a well-established way of life, the Europeans do not understand. That is why they show no respect to the cultural practices of the Igbo people. What Achebe delivers in the novel is that Africans are not savages and their societies are not mindless. The things fall apart because Okonkwo fails at the end to take his people back to the culture they all shared once. The sentiments the whites show to the blacks regarding the Christianity clearly recap the slave treatment the blacks were used to receive from the whites in the past. Achebe shows that the picture of the Africans portrayed in literature and histories are not real, but the picture was seen through the eyes of the Europeans. Consequently, Okonkwo hangs himself when he finds his established rules and orders are completely exiled by his own people and when he sees Igbo loses its honor by falling apart.

INTRODUCTION

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

(Yeats: 1921)

The above lines are quoted from a very famous piece of poetry, *The Second Coming* from the pen of an Irish poet, W.B. Yeats. Actually, these lines talk about a kind world where the accepted beliefs are doubted and the things are broken. Yeats' use of the word, "gyre" indicates the contemporary cynical attitudes of people toward life and religion. The

world is filled in anarchy since good remains no more in the society. Moreover, these lines also indicate the concept of "modernity", which shows how people make their bestiality go free. The seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart* is the depiction of this bestiality of a modern man. Like Yeats, Chinua Achebe laments on the loss of belief in religion and the irrational

murders or killings of the people of the Obi tribe. When the novel unfolds, it introduces the reader of Okonkwo, who is the most influential person in his tribe. His idea of masculinity makes him a very proud man in his tribe. He believes in hardness and thinks that man should not weep for the loss he experiences since the loss is, as he believes, a sign of weakness. A man's masculinity signifies that he is muscularly strong, powerful and godlike. From the reading of the novel, it is understood that Okonkwo acts like a god, who is very proud of his masculine identity and manliness. Achebe is seen to accost this sense of Nigerian identity that is supposed to deteriorate ultimately. In his *An Image of Africa*, Achebe has put his reasoning over the national identity "on an appropriately positive note in which [he] would suggest from [his] privileged position in African and Western cultures some advantages" (p104).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The West African Anglophone tradition has a very strong purpose in the history of African literature. The African oral tradition is replaced by the introduction of the Anglophone tradition in which the histories of colonization and conflict between the African tribe and the Whites are recorded in English. In J M Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, the nominative character interprets:

"The English novel is written in the first place by English people for English people. The Russian novel is written by Russians for Russians. But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they are glancing over their shoulder all the time as they write at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have assumed the role of the interpreter, interpreting Africa to the world." (p 51)

M. Keith Booker asserts that "the chapter of the Anglophone novel in English presents an introduction to the historical development of important issues and trends in the African novel" (p 30). According to Booker, Chinua Achebe is the founding figure in the contemporary African novel since his novels signify a clear breakthrough with the colonial tradition in Africa. Achebe comments (as cited in Guthrie, 2011) that "I have indicated

somewhat off-handedly that the national literature of Nigeria and of many other countries of Africa is, or will be, written in English. This may sound like a controversial statement, but it isn't. All I have done has been to look at the reality of present-day Africa" (p 59). Using English language in his novels as a medium of expression, Achebe has challenged the western cultural superiority and through this medium of language, Achebe has re-explored the African experiences and the history of their suffering and pain of what Booker signifies the "African cultural identity" (p 32). In addition, he has separated the African experiences from the colonial language of western culture.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has described a severe sort of conflict with regard to the influences of Christianity brought by the Whites that primarily contradict the accepted values of the people of Obi tribe. Since the novel belongs to the Anglophone tradition, the novel combines a sort of narration, proverbs, old values which are brought into being in the novel. There are some African traditional songs which convey the traditional folklore. The children say:

"The rain is falling, the sun is shining,

Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating" (p 25).

Besides, the people of Obi tribe observe a kind of religion along with its teaching which is based on what their ancestors do. This is the belief system that is orally accepted among the people of the Obi tribe. On the contrary, the new belief system of Christianity begins to tear down this belief especially in the younger generation. The village of Umuofia is seriously filled with a fear of lurking threat from the western Christianity. The values which Okonkwo along with his people keep in their heart do not match the new belief. Okonkwo says that "the white man has indeed brought a lunatic religion" (p 126) while the District Commissioner thinks that the new religious culture brought by them will create a peaceful administration in the village (p 137). This new religious culture in another sense indicates a new generation belief. To Okonkwo, the Christian religion, he experiences as peripetia, a reversal of the religious thoughts what Aristotle clearly defines as "a

change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite” (p 672).

Due to the effect of a post-colonial affair of the white missionaries, Achebe has noticed that a rich native culture is destroyed under an imperial power. As a result, Okonkwo commits suicides at the end out of increasing tension and a sense of humiliation. Thus, the Anglophone novel shows how the African experience on one hand and the new culture affecting the young generation on the other come to a contradiction. This contradiction tends to be more intense when Nwoye starts going into the church and his father reacts against it. His father roars and grips his son by the neck and tells “answer me before I kill you!” (p 107). In addition to this, the so-called ideals Okonkwo cherishes to be implemented in the society and represented in his clan remain no longer significant to his people. He takes no care of the thing that identity can be changed with regard to the ideals previously cherished. The way people behave after the missionaries’ preach indicates the existing identity is under flux. Shirley Chew argues that “as a consequence, identities are also in a constant state of flux. Colonialism has been a major engine driving an accelerated pace of change, forcing different cultures into new forms, ‘unfixing’ what was thought to be solid, and creating new identities” (p 19).

Experiencing the changes of Okonkwo’s belief, he starts to believe that his prevailing religious influences on the village fall apart. He feels like he along with his values and ideals is sent into the exile. Despite that, he alone no longer takes part in the colonial influx through which “replacing any earlier constructions of location and identity, is to establish at least partial control over reality, geography, history, and subjectivity” (Gilbert et al., 2002, p.165). In fact, things are really falling apart. Okonkwo finds out that “worthy men are no more” (p 200). To him, the intervention of the white missionaries brings home a post-colonial process of hostility and reform.

For the style and content, the novel, *Things Fall Apart* marks remain different according to the hybrid culture and identity. The African society and the European culture are not matched according to the values and ideologies. Both of the cultures remain strange to each other. It may be said that the European culture seeks dominance over the

traditional African society which breeds conflict between the two cultures as Booker points out. What the African believes is nothing but their own ideologies while the whites show their political power under the queen or the military power. Considering the historical engagement in the African novels, Eleni Coundouriotis has identified three narrative ways to put knowledge about the African historical account. They are “as an answer to colonialism, as a critique of state power in specific national contexts, and as an intervention in (inter)disciplinary conversations” (p 58).

For example, the District Commissioner says the tribe of Okonkwo that they should not molest others and burn the houses and warns “that must not happen in the dominion of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world” (p 137). The African people are strange to this sudden opposite values of the westerns. The novel presents the reader two kinds of cultures, namely, the known culture which the Africans understand and the alien culture which is brought by the western people. Achebe considers the Europeans in the novel as peculiar since the translator speaks “a different dialect from the audience. The translator’s words seem strange (and sometimes comically) he continues says “my buttocks” whenever he means to say ‘myself’” (p 68). Achebe does not mix the African society with the European culture rather he exposes the two different cultures fighting for their singular identities. In this respect, Oyekan Owomoyela’s observation can be taken into consideration. Owomoyela asserts that “Achebe presents a thorough understanding of narrative organisation and style, and a keen observation of and absorption with day-to-day happenings, not through the lenses of the anthropologist, but through the clear insight of one who was involved with and felt at one with his culture while at the same time inculcating western ideas” (p 18).

“Things Fall Apart”, Booker suggests, can be compared with Oedipus Rex where Okonkwo can be compared with Oedipus, extremely proud and strong (p 68). It is Okonkwo’s pride like Oedipus that he (Okonkwo) cannot come to terms with the new arrival of Christianity. It is his choice of what he should accept between the two beliefs. Achebe seems to be taking no partial stand, that is to say, he takes

neither the side of African nor the side of European. He does take this particular style only to create the African cultural identity. The new culture seems not to be like a Savior Christ who will save the tribal people from the ignorance, but it may practise a sort of colonial rule over the African social values.

Moreover, this new culture seems to be more acceptable to the African young generation while the African old generation ignores it. Therefore, begins an internal social conflict in the African society. Nwoye after the murder of Ikemefuna loses his belief in his society and later joins the white missionaries. Umuofia Obierika notices Nwoye in the missionaries and inquires "How is your father?" Nwoye replies, "I don't know. He is not my father." After Umuofia confronts Okonkwo to know the about Nwoye, his father remains uninterested (p 101). Okonkwo's not responding about his son to Umuofia is then assumed that he might realize his son's being "weak and woman-like" (p 2). He, afterwards, disowns his son, but Okonkwo's suicide indicates his inability to show strength to protect the Igbo culture.

METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a qualitative style of research and analysis to reach the goal of the paper. In this process, a standard amount of previous literary endeavors concentrated on the African literary canon has been taken care of and brought under considerations. Specifically, the previously published articles, books, webpages, and dissertation have been used for the analysis as presented in the paper. However, the paper, literally, re-reads *Things Fall Apart* to re-investigate to find out what actually happened to the Igbo people after the white missionaries came to operate in the Igbo's society.

Things Fall Apart: A Critical Results and Discussion

In an interview with *The Atlantic Online*, Achebe discloses how ideas to write *Things Fall Apart* came to mind:

The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with

the need to justify the slave trade and slavery. [...] This continued until the Africans themselves, in the middle of the twentieth century, took into their own hands the telling of their story. (Achebe, 2000)

This seminal novel is literally all about as A.S. Alimi observes that "collapse, breaking into pieces, chaos, and confusion" (p 121). Alimi has also explained that the novel has an additional theme featured as of "internal division in the tribe" (p 121). This literary canon opens an enterprise that catches the wider attention of the readers to the age of imperialism being "scramble for Africa" period of the 1880s to the 1890s. In his presentation of erudite discussion in the novel, Achebe achieves a distinctive place for his multifarious quality of his literary imagination. Achebe's narrative tone is one of the qualities of his literary imagination. As Dannenberg clearly puts it: "Achebe's narrator is so nimble and mercurial that he subverts all binaries.

This narrative and ideological mercuriality is achieved through the inclusion of many layers of voice, perspective and culture in the text" (p 176). His potential efficacy is rarely found less as a narrator, but more as a powerful national writer. S. Syed Fagruheen puts that "Achebe, who never patronizes his own culture shows how rival priests function as political agents and have shallower roots than their rhetoric implies" (p 36). The novel describes how the pride of Okonkwo has made him misfit in the new generation society. The textual analysis discloses Okonkwo as being a physically powerful as well as an influential person in the beginning, but is found spiritually weak at the end. In the Obi tribe there has been a kind of "mere anarchy" which is "loosened", that is to say, a kind of cruel war between the neighboring regions. Okonkwo tells his sons the stories of his land that read "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent" (p 37). The novel presents a conflict between two generations in their fullest in terms of their sensibilities and action.

Okonkwo, who is a strong man, confronts with a new concept of religion, namely, the Christianity. Hence, begins the disagreement of Okonkwo since he thinks that he may be or is dominated by this new ideology of religion. He has created fortune by his own labor

and industry following the social custom. He is not lazy like his father, but he enjoys his superiority. The sudden arrival of the Christianity - threatens Okonkwo's established social order, which Achebe points out as being duplicate complex colonial encounters between the Whites and the Blacks. This neo-colonial agenda unfolds a devastating effect on the Igbo people consequently. Indeed, "Achebe's novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. By unfolding the devastating effects of colonialism on the life of the Igbo people in *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe has successfully made a comprehensible demarcation between the pre-colonial and the colonial Igbo land" (p 105).

Actually the sudden arrival of Christianity has questioned the legitimacy of Okonkwo's rule and administration in the Obi tribe. His personal ideologies and what he cherishes in his mind as an essence of individuality encounter contradiction with the values and belief system of the Christianity. He believes that producing yams is the sign of manliness and he who feeds his family on yams is a great man indeed (p 23). Producing yams is so important in the community's life that the people call it "the king of crops, (who) was a very exacting king. For three or four moons it demanded hard work and constant attention from cock-crow till the chickens went back to roost" (Achebe, 1958). Besides, he considers man should not cry and he should not be afraid of anything since man is believed to be a strong being with him. His masculine strength or manliness is stereotyped when he beats his first wife in the day of "sacred peace" and according to the priest, the beating on the sacred day is his dishonor to the gods and the ancestors. Therefore, it bears a clear message that there is no sign of religion in his life and works except they show his manly code of conduct and all he does and suggests others is nothing but his individual ideologies. As a conscious advocate of anti-racial undertone, Achebe encounters Okonkwo's character's weakness. Maryam Navidi discusses this fundamental consciousness in Achebe leads the world readers "into this new African world of literariness comes Chinua Achebe, a conscious artist, who as a native of Africa, penetrates through the root cause of the problems of his native fellow beings" (p 10). His manliness has permitted him to kill Ikemefuna with his machete lest he should not be

considered weak (p 43). All through his life, he enjoys superiority over his clan. He has his own traditional values that construct his identity and his style of thinking and his values are so higher to him that he cannot change it and cannot like those thinking and values to be replaced by others' values as displayed by the Christianity.

In the novel, Okonkwo and his son Nwoye are seen being on a stand different from each other in terms of thinking, point of view and ethics. While Okonkwo believes in the fatherland, his son lives in his mother's world. Their keeping beliefs in their Mother's world carry meaning to be soft and weak to Okonkwo and in this respect, Nwoye is considered not a man but a woman. To his sons, the teaching of manliness and masculinity provided to them are, on the second thought, a kind of an emerging cruelty, which Okonkwo teaches and tries to pass on them. The church of the Christianity considers this belief system as thoroughly fake and devoid of usefulness. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* forms a topographic element with regards to all nine tribal villages, where Okonkwo's colonization remains the sole ideal and the cultural pride. When the Whites pledge the Christian reformation for the aboriginal beliefs to be replaced into new belief, it questions the validity of the association of the indigenous identity and falls into the challenge. In Postcolonial Liberalism, Duncan Ivison claims "the terms of association would have to be ones acceptable to both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal peoples – and therein lies the challenge" (p 72).

The people of Obi tribe believe in the god of earth, and the god of sky, Amadiora of the thunderbolt while the interpreter tells "all the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children" (p 103). On being asked by another man "if we leave our gods and follow your god, who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors?" the white man answers that "your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm" (p 103). In fact, the new religion has come to inform the people about the right path and peace, but on the other hand, the introduction of the white men and their values signify a scheme of colonialism in the tribe. The Christianity, as introduced by the whites, seems to be

oppressing to Okonkwo and his people. There is a conflict between the sense of individuality and the Christianity. Okonkwo presents the individual ideologies, which are his own and he spreads them into others, but in spite of his spreading, the new culture has torn his old ideologies and pride at last. Ultimately, being unable to cope with the teaching of Christianity, he commits suicide. In the colonized society, power is changed not in the way the aboriginal identity expresses it to be, but is treated in the way the colonial power replaces it to be. In *Postcolonial Contraventions*, Laura Chrisman puts her opinion that “there is always a risk that critique will be construed as an *hominem* attack, and indeed several critiques ... It is their profound intellectual substance, as much as their canonical power, or their typicality, that has prompted my critical engagement” (p 2).

CONCLUSION

Okonkwo is the representation of the Igbo society. The novel starts with “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond” (p 3). He has his own pride for his unmatched physical prowess, martial honors, titles, yams, lands, and three wives. He, who in spite of his being powerful, collapses at the end. Achebe’s emphasis of the Ibo society signifies how the internal colonizing in the African society is ended by the alien power (new culture) brought by the whites. The supremacy of the new culture breaks the regular frame of the Obi society and the basis of their belief. The people of the Igbo society think their priest and the priests are half human and half divine and their concept of gods is made by them. A deep study of Okonkwo confirms that he may not be the follower of any religion since he has no respect for the sacred peace which means the peace all through the society. There are a lot of gods regarding their beliefs and, on second thought, it may also be said that Okonkwo himself is a god to his people.

On the other hand, Okonkwo falls down from his social position to the downward due to the imperial domination of the European colonial power. The Ibo society exposes a sort of social ego against this imperial domination. In this case, Okonkwo can again be taken into consideration. He has done a lot

of hard work in his life and gains reputation in nine villages both as a rich man and a wrestler. He is socially constructed full man but the entrance of the Christianity questions his social stability and he may realize that his reputation, wealth and power, however, construct him not fully but partly since he may feel a lack of solid religious faith in his heart. His suicidal act proves that he cannot meet the demand of the new religion and, as a result, he cracks. Fanon says that “the colonial world is a Manichean world” meaning that “European and African societies come together in a mode of radical difference” (p 67).

Fanon may be right because the traditionally accepted belief cannot come to terms with the new belief all on a sudden. Achebe agrees on this point because the Christianity preaches its gospel and at the same time, it forces Obi and his people to follow the new religion. In the novel Achebe tells how “the men of Umuofia decides to collect without delay two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to appease the white man” (p 139). Therefore, two hundred bags of cowries mean a punishment who violates the rule of the new religion. In fact, the fighting between the old and the new religions is not only for the different religious beliefs but also for the domination of the whites on the tribe of Okonkwo.

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