
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social and Political Corruption in *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart* (1958): A Critical Study

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| ABSTRACT

This paper studies the idea of the social and political corruption in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) from a critical view point. It focuses on Okonkwo's characterization levels, and highlights the ontological, individualistic, political, and social aspects of the main character's aspects. Achebe's novel is a rich example of the social and political corruption of the tribal system that is built on myths, tribal mentality and physical prowess. Such a masterpiece by the Nigerian Novelist, Chinua Achebe, serves as an authentic representation of a particular time period and setting when Nigeria was under colonial oppression. It is thematically and stylistically rich in colonial accounts of Africa in terms of language use, traditional African lore, and cultural history.

| KEYWORDS

Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe, African Accounts, Corruption, Myths

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1. Introduction

Things Fall Apart (1958) is a rich example of the social and political corruption of the tribal system that is built on myths, tribal mentality and physical prowess. Such a masterpiece by the Nigerian Novelist, Chinua Achebe, serves as an authentic representation of a particular time period and setting when Nigeria was under colonial oppression. It is thematically and stylistically rich in colonial accounts of Africa in terms of language use, traditional African lore, and cultural history. Alam Mahbul states that, "Things Fall Apart is a response to earlier colonial accounts of Africa. So Achebe's choice of language is political. Some later African authors choose to revive native languages as a form of resistance to colonial culture. But Achebe wants to achieve cultural revitalization through English. He is capable of capturing the rhythm of the Igbo language. Achebe uses Igbo proverbs, folktales and vocabulary in the novel. Igbo proverbs are entirely native in character and use and they contain native wisdom and philosophy. Folktales are important parts of the Nigerian oral tradition which is deeply rooted in the daily lives of the Igbo. And lastly, Achebe uses many Igbo words in the novel to support his message to be conveyed. These original words demand special concentrations on them. By using these native contents Achebe makes the English language go through the process of appropriation" (103-104). Evidently, the novel documents a diverse range of events, historical aspects, and myths that together form a significant part of the African life during a critical time period. It is essential to mention that Achebe successfully employed historical documentation through the use of authentic phrases, proverbs, and language in a unique literary style that fits with the major political and social themes embedded in the novel. Throughout the novel, the major focus is placed on the major character, known as Okonkwo, who courageously and defiantly tries to challenge colonization, but for the most part, he remains unable to fix the erroneous and faulty defects in his character as a patriarch and in his community as a traditional and complicated tribe.

2. Discussion and Analysis

The absence of a real social system that depends on intellectual, individual and humanitarian relations is, perhaps, one of the core issues that dominates the tribal system of Okonkwo's tribe, which tragically leads to the crumbling of the society as a whole, besides the downfall of the individual as a leader, father, or just a citizen like any other persons. Emmanuel Obiechina emphasizes that Achebe's novel symbolizes a life full of chaos and disintegration, which characterizes most of Achebe's novels, he says that, "The novels of Chinua Achebe illustrate the statement that life is chaotic, but art is orderly. Out of the chaos of real life, he has created a patterned and artistically organized fictional world. He is able to divine the formal techniques and principles of organization which help to achieve a meaningful exploration of experience and to crystallize important insight into life, human nature and society. Much of his success depends on his being able to assimilate form to content in his work, his giving his novels a completeness, as well as justifying, in a satisfying and pleasing manner, the general expectations of a discriminating audience" (39)

Achebe is criticizing the "physical power" as a ruling authority in all its political, social and psychological associations. Such a tribal society is controlled by myths and stereotypes that weaken the essence of the community and drain its power on various levels. What piles the agony, are also the forces of colonization, that threaten the tribes' unity, security, and stability. Sataya Nath Pegu notes that the Igbo community in which Okonkwo lived in suffers from fatal mistakes that severely impact its social and familial structure starting from the simple unit of the one family. Such conflicts that Okonkwo went through, were merely social and familial in the first place. For example, the way he deals with his wife shows us an extreme violent and harsh oppression against women in general, and that is considered a major defect in the community, Pegu states that:

Oral tradition symbolizes the pre-colonial period of the Igbo community. The story of the novel is narrated in the oral mode where it depicts about the dangerous impact of colonial culture among the Igbo tribe of Nigeria. Though, the novel is written in English language, it focuses on the African sensibility in which the African words are used to juxtapose the indigenous identity. Okonkwo follows the Igbo traditional laws and customs, so he breaks the peace of sacred week by accusing his wife Ojiugo. Okonkwo's father Unoka is a lazy person who could not maintain the agrarian tradition of the Igbo people. But Okonkwo in the novel, stay as an epitome of the Igbo society. He was a great wrestler of the nine villages. His downfall occurred, when he breaks the peace of the sacred week and during the funeral day of Ogbuefi Ezeudu. Ezeudu's son is killed by Okonkwo's gun and this leads him to go for the exile. Such customary laws reflect Igbo system of life, which are presented in the proverbs. Nwoye and Ekemefuna are victimised due to the Okonkwo's act in maintaining the traditional norms. Okonkwo's idea of manliness not only killed Ekemefuna, but also affects Nwoye that leads him to adopt Christianity as a good religion. (3609)

One of the tragic flaws that led to Okonkwo's downfall is having a tribal mentality that is extremely obsessed with the trajectory of manliness and patriarchy. Achebe represents the physical and internal domination of the "tribal mentality" as a complete failure at the very end because it cannot survive in a constantly changing society that suffers from political and social turmoil. It is noticeable that Achebe's approach shows the failure of the tribal system from an individualistic point of view. Okonkwo's downfall as an individual or a leader of a family and a tribe can be looked at as a weakness of the system that finally brings external intervention or colonization by the time the tribe fails to defeat the vicious circle of corruption. Alam notes that "Colonialism makes the Igbo 'drained of' their 'essence'. Okonkwo symbolizes the essence of Umuofia; the suicide of Okonkwo, which is also a colonial effect, signifies the suicide of Umuofia's essence. Colonialism makes 'extraordinary possibilities' of the indigenous people 'wiped out'. Okonkwo stands for that extraordinary possibility which is wiped out through his suicide. Okonkwo symbolizes that 'mighty voices' which Césaire claims is 'stilled forever' by the colonial power." (104)

Social instability, as well as oppression, like 'patriarchy', the loss of 'freedom' and 'individualism', and also 'killing and bloodshed' are all results of an oppressing social and political system within the tribe that is basically based on myths that fail to create justice for the tribesmen. One of these conflicts is the oppressing treatment of woman where we see that Okonkwo mistreats his women as a patriarch. Women in such a tribal community have a low voice and are always silenced by their men. Despite the oppressing patriarchy, the conflict stems from a cultural misunderstanding that creates a huge gap between man and women, as T.Selvakkumar notes that "The conflict really is not between male and female, masculinity and femininity, rather it is about cultural ideas and beliefs about masculinity. Okonkwo, a traditional masculine man, not fitting into the new effeminate way of life, commits suicide; the traditional society continues to lose its young men and women to the new religion; Young men attend schools rather than go to the farm, traditional sacrifices become outlawed while younger men begin to disrespect their elders. The system clash and everything seems to fail. The Western colonizers are to blame for the collapse of the African system as they came uninvited and then dominated the people and their beliefs. The colonial conquest helped undermine the authority and power base of senior men as young men challenge titled chiefs and father, attacking the dominate idea of masculinity." (19)

El-Dessouky refers to the woman role in Okonkwo's tribe as both inferior and limited; women had only minor roles that are basically bound to the domestic household chores, but participate very little in other important tasks. Their role is limited to

prepare food and please their husbands, and they are rarely rewarded for such jobs, instead they are deprived of their basic human rights as to work equally with women, or to partake in common social and political roles. He says, "In *Things Fall Apart*, though gender plays a significant factor in determining one's responsibilities, seniority does play a small factor. Women usually had domestically oriented jobs and complimentary positions to men. In the Ibo culture, women were expected to give birth to sons to prolong the survival of the tribe. A woman's main role was being a good loyal housewife. They were expected to look after the children, clean and have the meals ready by the time their husband at home. If they did not do all of their responsibilities, it was fair game for their husbands to beat them. Wife beating was considered a common solution to disobedient women, and was allowed by the Ibo tribe." (101) Okonkwo's power does not create equity, justice and tribal stability because it is basically based on physical prowess rather than intellect. For example, Okonkwo does not show any respect for his father's feelings and emotions. Despite the fact that his father might not look ideal to him, but he wants to live the way he wants as an individual which Okonkwo severely criticizes neglecting the very right of his freedom which everyone should attain as a human being.

While Okonkwo wants his tribe to be strong, he neglects the dreams of his tribesmen through his dashful and authoritative behaviors. For example, Okonkwo turns oblivious against his family members' emotions. He kills his son although he knows how much other people love him. The story fits the context of "no external colonization without internal one". Okonkwo's tribe seems to fail on both the social and political levels. Additionally, Okonkwo himself seems to fail as a leader, a father, and a good individual in a society. Okonkwo's actions lack intellect, thoughtfulness and awareness making him appear as a selfish and uncaring leader. His unthoughtful and dashful behaviors and actions lead to his own downfall at the end. From our point of view, Okonkwo's suicide at the end was more like an escape because he fails to do any good for his family and the tribe he leads.

Additionally, the threads of patriarchy are inextricably woven into the two cultural backgrounds because it appears extremely obvious in Okonkwo's culture as patriarchy dominates the whole scene. Robert Wren refers to masculinity in *Things Fall Apart*, when he says "The male principle dominates the first part of the novel. Only Unoka, Okonkwo's father, shows a love of song and music, and he is contemptuously described as *agbala*, or "Woman", because, lazy and improvident, he has never had wealth or prestige enough to take the *ozo* title. He will never join the community of ancestors that, with the living, is the clan." (33).

On the psychological level, Okonkwo was taken by his own pride and arrogance which made him kill his adopted son in order not to appear, in front of others, as a weak sympathetic person. However, Okonkwo shows a great deal of regret and remorse after killing his son and that was a sign of his self-defeated personality because he does something he knows it was totally wrong.

On the political level, the novel sheds light on the way the colonized people had to struggle to live between myths, physicality and masculinity, chaos, conflict and instability. Mohammad Eldouseki notes that, "The order of the Ibo society is disrupted with the appearance of the white man in Africa and with the introduction of white religion. Okonkwo, who is looked highly upon by his people, is unable to adapt to the changes that accompany colonialism. He tries to live the traditional Ibo life; however the arrival of the white man into his society causes him to fall apart. In the end of the story, Okonkwo, in frustration, decapitates an employee of the British, then commits suicide which is a sin against the tradition to which he had clung to. The conflict in the novel, vested in Okonkwo, derives from the series of crushing blows which are leveled at traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture causing, in the end, the traditional society to fall apart. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recreated the tragic consequences that took place due to the clash between the Ibo society and the white man. By using a character such as Okonkwo, he showed how even the strong-willed people of the Ibo society were unable to overcome the British influences." (100)

Okonkwo's leadership of his tribe is based on physicality rather than spiritualism or intellect. It is based on the physical competence or "the survival of the strongest" as we see right from the beginning. Okonkwo realizes the fact that both his family and tribe are disintegrating because of his failure as a political leader, and a father. The novel suggests the fact that physical prowess is a weakness rather than being a strength point when it lacks intellect and ethics. While religion and spirituality seem to appear as shadows of the background of a tribal society represented by myths, we see at the end that people begin to convert into Christianity because they realized that faith is something more powerful than only myths.

Suicide in *Things Fall Apart* fits the colonial perspectives pertaining to the loss of the tribal system and the physical authority and domination. Okonkwo's suicide is both an external and internal juxtaposition to colonization. This is a significant part of the novel's tragic ending which goes in line with the collapse of his tribe as things began to crumble and fall on a more thorough level, Obiechina states that, "The paralyzing sense of tragedy which we feel about the life and death of Okonkwo is possible only because the man has been introduced to us with such remarkable vividness that we know him closely from the very beginning, and follow his every mood and action with considerable personal interest to the very end. In the same way we experience a sense of tragic dismay at the falling apart of the old traditional life of Umuofia with the coming of the Christian missionaries and the British administration because Achebe has won our sympathy by skillfully inducting us into its inner workings and the values which sustained it and gave it dignity and cohesion." (42)

It is worth noting here that suicide in this novel is very much politicized because it reflects a personal tragedy within a broader theme of social and political oppression represented by internal and external colonization. Despite the amazing traits that Okonkwo possesses as a warrior, the fatality of colonization dooms the tribal life and causes a lot of disturbance and chaos. This is clearly shown when we notice that "Things Fall Apart illustrates admirably Achebe's assimilation of the principle conflict as the balancing of many-sided traits - personal character traits and social traits - and the interaction of these individual and collective forces. A third element is always present in Achebe - the unforeseen - which introduces greater complexity and irony into the action. This last element we should regard as "fate" or "chance". (Obiechina, 42)

Okonkwo's failure in the society is, in fact, a representation of the downfall of both the society and the individual. The downfall of the individual is, in fact, a parallel to the downfall of the tribal system of the society. Okonkwo's suicide is viewed as a reaction against domination and social corruption. Suicide can be viewed as a criticism of the society and also as a reaction against the failure of the political, social and also individualistic relations within the society.

Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* meets the point where the downfall of the individual is correlated with the downfall of the society. Okonkwo's escape and suicide at the end is a surrender to all individualism dreams. The complexity of Okonkwo's situation within the society lies in the fact that the system of the tribe has to be based on relationships, friendship, physical power rather than of an actual systematic society. The novel shows us how Okonkwo had to struggle hard to establish his manhood and dignity presented to the reader as "individualism". The loss of Okonkwo's status in the society takes a further dimension on the identity level. The situation is obviously complex simply because Okonkwo's and his tribe's identity have to be washed away at the end to fit into the new colonized world. The identity crisis that we see in *Things Fall Apart* is completely personal in the sense that Okonkwo's is no longer able to live in a new colonized world, which imposes a new package of values and standards, which all turn Okonkwo into an outcast person.

Suicide in *Things Fall Apart* can also be looked at as the guilt and shame that Okonkwo wanted to get rid of because of his participation in killing his son and also because of his failure approach to lead his tribe. El-Dessouky refers to this profound conflict between Okonkwo, the father, and his son, "In *Things Fall Apart*, we see a conflict early in the novel between Okonkwo and his father, Unoka. Okonkwo thought of his father as a failure. Okonkwo did not take anything from his father starting the real world with nothing. Okonkwo's goal in life is to obtain great wealth and to have many wives and children. The people of Okonkwo's village considered this as a great status symbol. His greatest goal is his desire to become one of the powerful elders of the clan. Okonkwo saw his son, Nwoye, as gentle and forgiving. Okonkwo thought of these qualities as weak. Okonkwo also saw his son as lazy and wanted him to be a success like himself. Okonkwo's hard work pays off and helps him become one of the village's most respected members. Okonkwo establishes three out of four titles that are possible in the tribe." (100)

There is nothing positive in Okonkwo's relations to others even with his dearest ones, like his father and his son. His savage and rash behavior is the tragic flaw that finally leads him to self-destruction. Taiwo Oladele refers to Okonkwo's brutality when he says "However, in spite of this occasional display of kindness, it is Okonkwo's brutalities which influence the course of events in the novel and finally alienate him from his people. It is, for example, because of his harsh treatment of Nwoye and his part in the killing of Ikemefuna that tension develops between Okonkwo and his son, leading to a complete breakdown in communication between the two" (120)

Also, another drive for his suicide is that he came to realize the fact that savagery is something destructive, and that because of his savage behavior he is now alone. This is an important psychological drive behind his suicide because Okonkwo realized at the end that he is now out of the place as Taiwo Oladele says "when he finally acts on his own initiative and kills the court messenger, he realizes for the first time what he ought to have known a long time before-that he is alone. It is the thought that the unity of the tribe is gone forever and that there is no hope of reviving the old martial spirit that drives him to commit suicide"(121).

3. Conclusion

Part of the political and social downfall of the tribal system in Okonkwo's world is the political distance that Okonkwo makes between himself as a tribe leader, and his own people and the family he belongs to. In fact, suicide was a point reached when Okonkwo has to isolate himself from the society he belongs to. At the end, Okonkwo had to leave his tribe as an exile punishment for the crime he committed. And then he had to regret his crime against his son although he knew it was part of the oracle, but he also realized that it was all a big mistake. Also, Okonkwo's suicide was because he has gradually failed to maintain balance within his own family members, and also his tribe. Okonkwo is driven by his own tribal mentality rather than reason or intellect. Finally, we can link all that change we see at the end of the novel with the title itself. From our point view, we see that when things do fall apart, they also do bring new changes. Definitely, Okonkwo's suicide at the end foreshadows an end for the tribal system or a failure of the tribe, but also it represents the failure of the physical prowess as a controlling and leading authority.

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