

**COLONIAL ENCOUNTER AND AFRICAN TRADITION IN
CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART***

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Abstract

Colonialism has always been a painful process, and Africa like India in general and Achebe's Nigeria in particular has had its experience of the colonial rule. Chinua Achebe has rightly reconstructed historical and political events regarding the recent past of the Igbo people who were suppressed and oppressed by the Europeans. Narrated within a specific locale, Achebe provides alternative sets of traditions, ideals, values and behavior while reclaiming his heritage and at the same time provides directions for constructive changes. An attempt is also made to show how Igbo community life is represented and how the arrival of white missionaries and colonial administrative gradually started to question and destroyed that traditional life of Igbo people from within by eroding its value system.

Further the paper will explore social, political, religious, cultural, economical, as well as educational suppression of Igbo tribe.

Colonialism has always been a painful process, and Africa like India in general and Achebe's Nigeria in particular has had its experience of the colonial rule. Colonial encounter has always been related with the history of humiliating colonialism and slavery. Like other colonies, Africa too had experienced this violent trauma of colonialism which left the scars on colonized and finds themselves distorted and lost.

The themes of colonial encounter, human condition and sustenance of African culture and traditions receive the main focus of Achebe in all his novels. Chinua Achebe's body of work has been credited as the emergence of an African fiction that goes beyond the Eurocentric discourses about African cultures. Achebe's literature, starting from *Things Fall Apart*, has been essentialized as the beginning of authentic African literature—the colony speaking back which were treated as 'other'.

African literature like other living literatures is an end in itself and is more functional and purposeful. It has the capacity to explore and expose the great potentialities of self, the man of Africa. The basic things, of African literature are not beauty and pleasure but in fact to preserve

African Cultural identity and integrity unaffected by the outside world through 're-education and regeneration of African Society. Africa is no longer a gloomy phenomenon, a 'dark' continent of dense forests, cannibals, and wild life but a blooming and shining star.

Africa attracted the European mind in the past right from the time of prince Henry, the Navigator in the fifteenth century, and it has been found both fascinating and repellent. The impression given by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* as a land of thrilling silences of thick forests, sudden sunsets, formidable vultures and black-water fever and the throbbing big drums and primitive customs has prompted the European mind to dismiss Africa as a 'trackless wilderness' devoid of meaning. Further the slave trade too cannot be ignored.

The novels of Chinua Achebe speak of Igbo life, history, culture and cultural change. *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964) and *A Man of the People* (1966) all deals with the critiques of colonization and constitute a kind of chronological survey of life in Eastern Nigeria.

Chinua Achebe, and Cyprian Ekwensi, the two prolific Nigerian pioneers of modern Nigerian novel in English and Flora Nwapa have enriched the West-African writing in English and popularised Igbo literature beyond Igbo readership. The Igbo literary revolution, a transition from fiction-writing in Igbo to writing in English took place in Nigeria after the Second World War. The colonial writers used the 'novel' as a tool to voice the traumatic experiences of colonial rule and make the world know about it.

Chinua Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* has figured in the literature of several countries and is translated to around sixty languages over the past six decades. According to Achebe storytelling functions as a bridge between generations and as a means of passing the wisdom. Achebe's aim is to encourage, empower the new generation of educated Nigerians and take the responsibility to change the scenario. For Achebe, novel is a vehicle for self discovery. Writing is an activity through which the African can define his identity and re- discover his historical roots.

The British colony, Nigeria gained independence in 1960. Nigeria is now, one of the most populated countries in the world and is the largest democracy in Africa. The Igbos or Ibos, of the Southern and Eastern Nigeria, were of hundreds of tribal clans. These many diverse clans had their own dialects, culture, political and governing systems, etc. The Igboland, the home of the Igbo people covers most of the South-East Nigeria.

Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* is located in specific socio-cultural changes which were taking place in the 1880s and 1890s in Eastern Nigeria, in a region known as lower Niger Delta, which presents Igbo proverbs, Igbo words, Igbo social intercourse, Igbo planting, and Igbo community rituals, all these bestow a specific Nigerian reality to the novel. Chinua has artistically represented Igbo community life as well as also shown how the arrival of white missionaries and colonial administrative gradually started to question and destroyed that traditional life of Igbo people from within by crushing down their value system, firstly through religious conversions and then by involving political system in the place of traditional Igbo one. Achebe's education in English and his exposure to European customs have helped him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture.

Going back to the past and writing about it to rediscover the African identity not only fell within the parameters of postcolonial discourse but also became a way of instilling a feeling

of pride in the people of a continent whose lives had been distorted both by the colonial rule and in imperial representations. Fanon views this as:

Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it.

Narrated within a specific locale, Achebe provides alternative sets of traditions, ideals, values and behavior while reclaiming his heritage and at the same time provides directions for constructive changes. This reflects nostalgia for the past of the nation. The author recognises not only the weaknesses but also the strong points of the old privilege. According to Anuradha Ghosh, Achebe's narration of the pre-colonial world presents-

The unsullied, untarnished image of an Africa with her several gods and goddesses, rituals and taboos, languages, cultures and traditions, songs and dances, bounty and grace, health and well-being may be a romantic reconstruction of the primal world of peace and happiness – a kind of golden age that is posited in order to counter-point the humiliation, the squalor and the ugliness of colonial exploitation. The notion of freedom and beauty and the poignant rendering of a world that has not yet lost its fine sense of balance is a harmonious extension of trying to find roots in the collective unconsciousness of the people who had their own folk forms of expression, ways of living and belief systems suited to the needs of their contexts.

Achebe narrates the loss of the immaculate glory of a civilisation that had flourished on the strength of its own merits and demerits. The strong presence of the community, the rich culture of the people, the village meetings and the disputes by village elders highlight the sophistication and democratic tradition of the Igbos. Achebe's evocation of the past is not just to portray a cultural resistance but to see things as they were and make the readers realize their rich cultural heritage.

Achebe, uses the novel as an instrument of self-recovery, a means to find his historical roots, and identity of his own people. In various statements, Achebe projected himself as a chronicler of the transition brought to Igbo society by the colonial encounter, with a role to teach his people. In one of the magazine *Nigeria Magazine* he states:

That African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African peoples all but lost in the colonial period, and it is this dignity that they must regain.

Achebe views European Colonialism as the factor that had made the most devastating assault on the African personality, his psyche and his self-evaluation. This was done in a systematic manner by consistently belittling the black people based on pseudo-biological theorizing about Africa and the African personality based on Darwin's Theory of Evolution. With a view that the white people are superior race, they categorized the black races as sub-human beings, as savage, a little higher than the animals, uncivilized and in need to be taken care under the paternal civilizing influence of the white people. The missionary movements, for

instance, in Nigeria spring in part from and is motivated by the perceived need to enlighten the ‘dark continent’ and more importantly to assert white superiority.

Achebe’s five novels can, therefore, be profitably studied as the sequential record of the struggles of Igbo society against colonial domination. They highlight the struggles of the Igbo tribe in their progression from village to city life under the perpetual influence of the West. These narratives may be grouped into the village and city novels. The early two novels – *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* – are elaborate portrayal of Igbo past history and their pristine culture before and at the point of contact with west. The Igbo society presented in the village novels is a self-sustained community which still retained their myths, beliefs, customs, religion, proverbs, tales and taboos with an utmost sense of duty. They made their own laws and rules in accordance with their culture and tradition and were happy and self satisfied with it. But to their bad luck or primitiveness all these underwent drastic change with the intervention of the white man. The third novel, *No Longer at Ease*, speaks about the Igbo story during the peak of colonial intrusion into the native culture where the good intentions of clansman like Obi Okonkwo lacks all convictions to change the corrupt system handed down to the native elites by the colonial government. The latter group of novels, namely *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, set in cities, may be regarded as modern Igbo narratives constitutive of their post-colonial experience in their assignation with destiny in running their independent country. Tribal elements are elaborated upon as a common determiner in all the five novels. Besides, Achebe’s view on the function of art gets transformed with each succeeding novel as he records the series of events unraveled in Nigerian or African politics. Achebe’s novels mapped the various contours of Igbo tribal life in its struggle against the continuing encroachment of their tribal cultural space: even after independence, Achebe’s country have to face neo-colonialism and modernization if not by direct but by indirect uninterrupted control over the erstwhile empire through economic dominance and control of the media. A critical examination of his five novels reveals the tribal element in his novels which is crucial towards understanding the lived experiences of the natives.

The plot structure of Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is balanced and divided into three main parts. The first part of the novel covers chapters one to thirteen. During the narration of this part, Achebe relates the life and times of the protagonist Okonkwo of Umuofia. In the same breath, he acquaints us with the society of Umuofia, its pattern of life, social framework, political make-up and religious ethic. Through the life of Okonkwo and his society, Achebe focuses on their kinship bonds, their religion, their feast and festivities, their court system and their customs and traditions. Part one of the novel ends with the banishment of Okonkwo from Umuofia and his exile to his mother’s village Mbanto. The second part of the novel covers chapter fourteen to nineteen traces the crucial events both in the life of the hero and that of the clan. A new religion takes root among the Igbo of Umuofia. The newly intruding white man establishes his religion, school and court besides his own government Okonkwo’s life comes under the shadow of unrelenting tragedy. His son Nwoye proves to be a thorn on his side by deserting him and joining the new band of Christians. Things have started falling ‘apart’ with the advent of white man, his church and his government. Thus the second part of the novel though short is a vital part of the novel where there is a change for the worse in the life of the Igbo community. Third part consists of chapters twenty to twenty five. The last six chapters of the novel trace complete bulldozing of the native culture by Western Codes of belief and the blowing up of the roots of the Igbo society.

Achebe objectively depicts how anarchy entered the society of Igboland. He dispassionately shows that both the European colonists and the natives are equally responsible for bringing about fall of a once rich native culture. The mission of the Christians is to spread their religion by some means or other. The profused purpose of Mr. Brown and Reversend Mr. Smith to bring in the civilization the Western world for their benefit has an ulterior motive of bringing it under the British rule. They divide the family bonds by baiting them with money and material comfort. As a result old values collapse. People like Okonkwo unwilling to compromise with the new order of the foreigners, device their own ways of revenge. Some die fighting the whites and some like Okonkwo commit suicide to escape from a fate worse than death. The last chapters of the novel not only trace the individual tragedy of Okonkwo but also the larger tragedy suffered by the society of Umuofia.

On one level, the conflict is between the traditional society of Umuofia and the new customs brought by the whites, which are in turn adopted by many of the villagers. Okonkwo also struggles to be as different from his deceased father as possible. He believes his father to have been weak, effeminate, lazy, ignominious, and poor. Consequently, Okonkwo strives to be strong, masculine, industrious, respected, and wealthy. The Rising action lies in Enoch's unmarking of an Egwugwu; the Egwugwu's burning of the church, and the District Commissioner's sneaky arrest of Umuofian leaders force the tension between Umuofia and the colonizers to a breaking point. The climax of the novel lies in Okonkwo's murder, or Uchu, of a court messenger.

In the novel, Okonkwo was disciplined again for beating his youngest wife during the 'Week of Peace' which was a taboo to the Igbos. His action may stand justified but should not have been done during the sacred week. As the man of the family in paternalistic society, it is his primary duty to oversee the overall needs of the family. The erring wife was found neglecting her children and household duties, for which appropriate discipline was expected. This highlights the great impact of white culture on the Igbo life. As a loyal citizen of Umuofia, Okonkwo did not question the law of the land and offered the needful sacrifices demanded of him by Ezeani, the priest of the Earth goddess.

Okonkwo in his seven years exile in Mbanta over the inadvertent killing of a boy became the puppet or victim in the hands of the missionary who took advantage of the situation. With the help of the local converts and the backing of the colonial government, the white man established his religious influence. The Umuofia people's attitudes towards the white man had undergone a drastic change from hostility to one of helplessness. Okonkwo's return from Mbanta after seven years exile witnessed a humiliating homecoming to the hero, and none appeared to recognize him. It seems the entire community has gone under drastic change with regards to values, tradition and customs. Power centres of the village have shifted from loyalty towards the clan to mindless allegiance to the 'things' of the white man. The fear that the oldest member of Mbanta expressed about the younger generations is reflective of the fearful changes within the community:

...the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires... it is good for kinsmen to do it (gather together) so... I am saying it because I fear for the younger generations, for you people...because you do not understand how strong is the bond of kinship. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion

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has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turned on his master. I fear for you and I fear for the clan. (pg 152)

Okonkwo was feared by his wives and children but the needful respect for the father of the house seems to be missing, largely because Okonkwo ruled his household by the threat of force and the old value traditional system. Okonkwo's family consisted of his three wives and nine children. His wives and children lived in constant fear of him. It was a complete male chauvinistic tribal world where he lived in and enjoyed the notion of manliness. The warmth of fatherly love and kindness is not seen in his fiery eyes, though he is not a cruel person. The relationship between father and son was crucial to the existence of the traditional system because it is the foundation of the ancestral authority upon which the continuity of the institutions, common values, attitudes and sentiments of the traditional culture depended.

The introduction of Christianity therefore alienated the converts from their traditional society and got themselves excommunicated from them. The elders of the community were presented in extremely difficult and helpless situation. The traditional religion and Christianity are diametrically different in their doctrines; while Christianity insists on the existence of one God, the traditional religion believes in the existence of many gods and goddesses. In the late nineteenth century, when the first contact with Christianity was recorded in the novel, the meeting of the two religious systems was a confrontation. The conflict resolved itself through the mass defection to the white man's camp, not necessarily due to genuine faith in God.

Achebe presents the inevitability of conflict and change in the traditionalistic Igbo society by introducing the combine forces of Christian missions, administration and trade to draw the natives away from the traditional system. The survival of the missionaries in the Evil Forest marks the triumph of the new faith over the traditional belief system. Besides emotional, psychological and spiritual appeals the missionaries used tactics to win new converts, combining aggressive evangelism with provision of modern, literate education and dispensaries.

Things Fall Apart, as the title suggest, is concerned with the dislocation of the African society caused by the impact of Western colonialism. Achebe's reconstruction of the Igbo village life is directed at revealing the forces at work both inside and outside traditional society that prepared the way for its eventual disintegration. His purpose is therefore not primarily to show its values – though this is an undoubtedly significant side line – but rather to show it as a living structure, as an organism animated with the life and movement of its members: and within this framework is contained the sphere of action which involves the personal drama of the characters themselves. To this end Achebe employs literary tools to examine the worth and dignity of his community before and after its collision course with an alien culture. Viewed from the perspective of a world in which various cultures are engaged in constant action and interaction, *Things Fall Apart* transcends the narrow confines of a group of villages and reflects the trauma of nations that seek to expand their horizons without sacrificing traditional values that are traditional and indigenous.

Language is an important theme in *Things Fall Apart* on several levels. Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. It is also significant that he clearly intended it to be read by the west. His goal was to critique and amend

the portrait of Africa that was painted by so many writers of the colonial period and in doing so required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through his inclusion of proverbs, folk tales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe managed to capture and convey the rhythm, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language.

The novel succeeds in convincing and puts across authentic fictional terms, that the African societies had a great culture of their own. Achebe portrayed successfully the humanism and grandeur in a dying order.

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