

IGBO CULTURE AND BRITISH IMPERIALISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a pioneer book which is critically acclaimed around the globe. It is significant African narrative in the history of African literature as it speaks of African culture and dominance of the British. The present paper tries to focus on the Igbo culture and their traditions which are predominant culture in Nigeria and it aims to illustrate the various cultures of the Igbo such as: polytheistic religion, the mother land, father-son heritage, beliefs in evil spirits and farming traditions of the Igbo. And also this paper elucidates the downfall of Igbo society at time of its colonisation by the British and also it investigates the British imperialism and how it affects on the Igbo society.

Keywords: *Igbo culture, Colonisation and British Imperialism.*

Chinua Achebe is indispensable writer in African literature, whose work *Things Fall Apart*, is acclaimed as the finest work about the life in Nigeria. *Things Fall Apart* has been sold more than eight million copies in English language and been translated into more than fifty other languages. It is unquestionably, *Things Fall Apart* is an immense novel among the readers, for instance, it is a prescribed novel in schools, colleges and universities in Nigeria and other parts of countries. It received many awards. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* deals with the 'falling apart' of the indigenous culture and their traditions. The story revolves around the central character Okonkwo, tragic hero of the novel, is split into three sections and set pre-colonial and post-colonial time in Nigeria at the end of nineteenth century.

Culture and tradition are the notable subject matters in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. He has given much importance to his culture Igbo which is filled with practises like polytheistic religion, the mother land, father-son heritage and beliefs in evil spirits. Achebe and his clan had belief in many deities that is polytheistic that is meant worshipping of more than one god who are overseen every aspect of life. These various gods has to be reported to supreme god which has been played in major role throughout the novel.

Achebe has depicted the importance of the local earth gods and goddesses of the Igbo in Umuofia, setting of the novel for instance, during the week of peace Ezeani, the priest has explained that the Igbo people respect the local gods and ancestors and the Igbo people do not do any harm to anyone during the week of peace because it signifies the culture of the African society and local gods. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where in Okonkwo has broken the peace by beating his wife, which has been considered as a crime in Umofia. The local priest Ezeani expressed his rage when he came to know that Okonkwo broke the peace. When the priest meets Okonkwo who invites him with kola nut however, the priest has rejected Okonkwo's hospitality. The priest says, "Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors... We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessings our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan" (Achebe 23). It is clearly showed that the importance of Igbo society and it helps the reader to understand the culture of the people and significance of goddess and ancestors.

The week of peace has played a vital role among the Igbos who did not do any work during the week of peace and they would call their neighbours and invited to drink palm-wine. Achebe is criticised a strange practice which had followed by the Igbos during the week of the peace is that if a man dies during the week of peace he will not be buried whereas they will be thrown away in the forest in particular in Obodoani as result unknown disease will spread among the African clan. Achebe illustrates that Igbo people who even though do have rich culture and traditions nevertheless they are lacking in rational thinking. Here, he exposed the superstitions practised by Igbo people. The white men have taken this superstitious belief as an advantage to split the Igbo people. Achebe states, "It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding. They throw away large numbers of men and women without burial" (24). Achebe's novels are filled with high African cultural heritage in particular the mother land which is a special place for Africans where they received the love and affection.

Achebe has used yam as a symbol of wealth and masculinity, is exclusively cultivated by men in Umoufia society. The narrator refers yam as 'the king of crops' for which men work hard from cockcrow till the chickens went back to roost and they shared with their family. Yam also gives wealth of the family. In Umuofia, yam is the major source for living. Yam harvesting is taken place during the feast of the New Yam, is a great festival for Igbos. it is celebrated every New Year as a tribute to earth goddess Ani, who is the source of all fertility. Ani has played an vital role in the life of the Umoufian society; they are worshiped in a special way than other deities for the reason is that they are believed that she is the judge of morality and conduct of the people. This feast takes two or three days in which they enjoyed with their other clans. Hence, Yam and the New Yam festival are the part of their life which showed that they are given importance to agriculture and ancestral spirits.

Proverbs are exceptional in every culture, filled with a profound knowledge and it speaks one's culture. It expresses the general truth, a piece of advice and life of the people. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the best example of it. He has used many important proverbs which are dealing with the practical life of Igbo. Igbo's proverbs are taught reasoning, traditions and cultural values. In this novel, Okonkwo has frequently used those proverbs. For instance, "Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water" (3). It articulates that he is very strong, fast and agile.

The second part of the paper is going to analyse the colonisation and its impact on Igbo society. Achebe is a serious writer who has brought the dismay of colonisation in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. Colonisation is establishing or extending the empire's territory over the weak country by which they conquer the poor countries. The Europeans have conquered most parts of the world, when the Europeans come to other territory they have brought their cultural norms such as language, ideas, culture and tradition, institutions and technical inventions with them from which the Europeans have uphold their power structure on the colonised countries as a result they are imposing the European ideology on the other it also known as imperial activity. Achebe has displayed the both negative and positive faces of the British imperialism on the Igbo society in *Things Fall Apart* wherein he has pointed out that the settlement of the British missionaries in Umuofia where they have built church and won a handful converts in surrounding town and villages, this has become great sorrow to the leaders of the clan. Here, Achebe has depicted the Christian religion and its faith. This new faith and religion have spread little by little and Igbo people got attention o it and converted more, Nwoye, son of Okonkwo converted into Christian out of fear of father's rudeness whereas new religion gives him energy and happiness.

The missionaries have criticised the local gods and goddess of the Igbo, they said that they are worshipping the false gods. The Whiteman said that the Igbos have worshipped "false gods, gods of wood and stone... Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm. They are pieces of wood and stone" (106-107). The White man expresses "We have been sent by this great god to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to him so that you may be saved when you die" (106). The above quote demonstrated that the idea of conversion of the indigenous to Christianity thereby the British instil their religious propagation for which they built churches in the village in addition they have formed a government which would rule the village and would punish the people. When Okonkwo has known this he would become heartbroken about this new religion and conversion and then he wanted to unite his people. Okonkwo asked his friend Obierika with sadness whether the White men understand the custom of them. Obierika has replied:

Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of of the stranger, How can he when he does not even speak our togues? But he says that our customs are bad and

our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? (129)

This has depicted that the aguish of Okokwo and his friend Obierika about the missionaries and people have turned against their own Igbo culture because of the missionaries who think that their culture, tradition, customs and language are superior to the Other that is the third world countries. The British believed that the orients are inferior, lacking in morals, uncivilised not humans so that the British want to civilise the indigenious. This vividly displayed Achebe through both Okokwo and Obierika. Further, Obierika says, "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to say. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (129).

Mr. Brown , the white missionary who has won handful of converts because his friendly behaviour by which has become famous among the clan and he learnt a good deal about the religion of the Igbo and he has come to conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed . He has made friends with some of the great men of the clan and one of the villagers who has presented with a carved elephant tusk which is a sign of dignity and rank according to the Umofian belief. Though he was friendly with people his ultimate goal is to spread Christianity and its language, and destroy the native culture, therefore Obierika called them as "the white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion" (129).

Achebe is not only portrayed the dark face of imperialism but also demonstrated the positive or the benefits of imperialism, education which has great impact on the clan, the more young people came to school and they are educated , Mr. Brown has encouraged them with gifts. Igbos have worked morning their farms and the afternoon has gone to school. Hence, education is the greatest gift that is given by the British to the orients. Little by little things have been changed with new religion and government which have been changed the people's eyes and minds.

After departure of Mr. Brown whose successor the Reverend James Smith has entered in Umofia. He is not a good human being, whereas, arrogant and devilish, he has seen them differently, has condemned Mr. Brown's policies. He has seen a thing as black and white, he thinks that black is evil. He is filled with white supremacy mind which has been represented racist mind set of the Europeans. It is the highest form of imperialism. These incidents make Okonkwo sad, heartbreaking, depressing and miserable and the end he has committed suicide out of his clan has been changed and they have not heard the voice of him, so he is falling apart not only him but also his Igbo society which is socially, politically and religiously organic at the beginning of the book, later it is divided and lost all the energy at end of the

book. Hence, it is falling apart due to its own brutal rules and the coming of the British missionaries and their government. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has vividly recorded the real picture of his Igbo society and the dismay of new religion, government and downfall of the Igbo.

References:

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