

CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY

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Abstract:

This paper throws a light at the postcolonial study in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe, a celebrated Nigerian writer and the recipient of numerous honours and awards has contributed immensely to African and world literature. He brings out the voice of the colonized people through the character of the hero, Okonkwo who struggles to reclaim his identity and culture but fails miserably before the European colonizing power. He is a titled and honourable man who is highly respected by the clan as a renowned warrior. He promptly follows the tradition and indulges in exhibiting his manly qualities. One accidental killing of the member of the clan imposes on him to go on an exile. Postcolonial dominance in his native on his return crushes him and when he ultimately realizes that the ancestry of the cultural norms revered by him has no place in the European occupied world, he succumbs giving away his life. The title 'Things Fall Apart' drawn from the poem "The Second Coming" of the Irish Poet W. B. Yeats undoubtedly symbolizes the customs and traditions of the Nigerian culture falling apart. The theme of the plot is the rise and fall of the hero. The postcolonial rule is solely responsible for the things to fall apart. Achebe being a Christian and strongly influenced by the Anglican culture reveals both the positive as well as negative elements of both the cultures and reveals through his novel the pathetic plight of the indigenous warriors and the loss of traditional beliefs.

Keywords: tradition, colonization, Christian missionaries, Nigerian culture

Achebe, a celebrated Nigerian writer and the recipient of numerous honours and awards has contributed immensely to African and world literature. Written by the author when he was in his mid-twenties, the debut novel *Things Fall Apart* has been widely recognized, accepted and translated to more than fifty languages. A descendant of the family which had attained the highest title in the Igbo culture, Achebe was exposed to double identity and dual culture at a very young age as he was raised in the large village of Ogidi which was one of the first centers of the Anglican missionary work in Eastern Nigeria. His father had converted to Christianity

and thereby Achebe was able to witness the growth and transformation in the postcolonial world of Nigeria and the subsequent cultural disintegration of the native Igbo culture. He brings out the voice of the colonized people through the character of the hero, Okonkwo who struggles to reclaim his identity and culture but fails miserably before the European colonizing power and ultimately realizes that the ancestry of the cultural norms revered by him has no place in the European occupied world that he succumbs hanging to a tree being completely aware that his tradition would not allow him to be cremated by his family due to his suicide. The title 'Things Fall Apart' drawn from the poem "The Second Coming" of the Irish Poet W. B. Yeats undoubtedly symbolizes the customs and traditions of the Nigerian culture falling apart. Okonkwo gains sympathy of the every reader and rises to the status of a tragic hero. In this regard Biyi Bandele in the introduction to *Things Falls Apart* writes,

Reader, beware: *Things Fall Apart* is savage and tender; it blisters with wit and radiates with the inner glow of hard-earned compassion. It is disillusioned but passionately engaged, solemn while being exuberant; it is polemical but wise. There is not a shred of the congealed violence of cheap sentimentality: Achebe's characters do not seek our permission to be human, they do not apologise for being complex (or for being African, or for being human, or for being extraordinarily alive).

Okonkwo, the protagonist is introduced twenty years after his memorable encounter with Amalinze the Cat, the great wrestler who was unbeaten from Umofia to Mbiano for seven years. He was called so as his back would never touch the earth. Okonkwo when he was eighteen fought with the Cat and threw Amalinze. This win brought Okonkwo the greatest fame that he was well known throughout the nine villages of Umofia and even beyond. He is thirty-eight when the story begins. 'He is tall and huge. His bushy eyebrows and wide nose give him a severe look. He breathes heavily and it is said that when he slept, his wives and children could hear him breathe. When he walks, his heels hardly touched the ground and seemed to walk on springs as if he would pounce on somebody. He has a slight stammer and whenever he is angry he can't get his words quickly enough and so he would use his fists' (3). He is a titled and honourable man who is respected as a renowned warrior and has three wives and eight children. He had been to several tribal wars and returned victorious. As a mark of his undefeated glory he has five severed human heads in his hut and expects his son Nwoye to beget his manly qualities. Unfortunately Nwoye resembles his grandfather Unoka by being mild and being interested in his mother's stories. Hence Okonkwo repeatedly beats his son as an endeavour to transform him as he opines that a man is one who is tough and has or shows no emotions. He is perpetually afraid to be recognized as a weak man and hence has stern control over his wives and children. Be it 'The Week of Peace' or the 'Feast of New Yam' Okonkwo dominates the household by disturbing the peace and creating ruckus over trivial matters. During the 'Week of Peace' he hits his third wife thus violating the peace and consequently when Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess commands Okonkwo, "You will bring to the

shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries”(23). Okonkwo mutely obeys giving much more than asked as a respect to the tradition. To prove the world that he is the ‘man’ he even goes to the extent of the killing the young Ikemefuna who had lived in his house for three years and used to call Okonkwo as ‘father’ thereby provoking the anguish and hatred in the heart of his eldest son Nwoye who considered Ikemefuna to be his brother. Though he suffers for two days after Ikemefuna's death with no food and sleep; thinking again and again about the boy who was like a son to him. When his favourite daughter Ezinma brings him the food on the third day, he wishes that she were a boy and finally recovers from the unrealized crime committed by him with a thought of how a man with his battle record can react like a woman over the death of a boy. This notion of Okonkwo to consider himself as the so called ‘man’ is due to his extreme dislike and disgust for his father who was called ‘agbala’ by one of his playmates which meant ‘a woman’. Okonkwo is ashamed of his father who had not taken any title in his life and had no young wife to take care of him. Unoka was a man of failure. He was lazy and never worked hard to earn a living. If money came his way as it rarely did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbours and made merry. He was a tall, thin man with a slight stoop, He appeared “haggard and mournful . . . except when he was drinking or playing his flute”(4). An excellent flutist, a laughing stock of the community, a debtor and a failure constitute Unoka. Unoka had once consulted the Oracle of the Hills and Cave for bad harvests each year in spite of his sacrifices and planting procedures and in turn was told to go home and "work like a man." He died of swelling in his stomach and limbs which was considered an abomination of the earth goddess in the Nigerian tradition and therefore could not be buried properly. Therefore he was taken to the Evil Forest to die. When they carried him away, he took his flute with him.

Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature and hence gender roles are conspicuously well defined be it in farming or in marital life. The women would go to the bush to collect firewood and grow women's crops like coco–yams, beans, and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop that demanded hard work. Hence Okonkwo would work for long hours on his farms and expected his family members to do the same. Although they did not possess his strength, they worked submissively without any complaints because of their fear for him. Though Okonkwo’s initial life is poverty ridden, due to hard work he raises himself to be one of the most respected elders of the clan that his elders describe his greatness as,

“If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with the kings and the elders” (6-7).

The richness in Okonkwo’s house is evident where he lives in a hut of his own, and each of his three wives lives in a hut of her own with her children. As the Nigerian clan followed polytheistic religion, Okonkwo keeps the symbols of his personal god and ancestral spirits and where he offers prayers. He has “a ‘medicine house’ or shrine where he has kept wooden

symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children” (11). Every person has his own *chi* or personal god. The elders of the clan believed that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his *chi* agreed. Whenever there would be a marriage in the clan the elders would bless the couple with good wishes and say looking at Okonkwo as,

“Your daughter will bear us sons like you” (86).

It is because of the high regard and respect that the clan chooses Okonkwo to carry out the negotiations with their enemy when the daughter of Umofia is murdered and select Okonkwoto care for Ikemefuna until their gods decide what to do with him.

Though there were several evil and superstitious practices in the Nigerian world in the name of tradition such as considering a person to be an abomination to earth and thereby carrying them to evil forest to die there without burial; throwing the innocent newborns to the evil forests because they are born twins etc., yet their society regarded them with highest esteem. Once when the wooden instrument signifying that there has been a death was blown at intervals as “Go-di-di-go-go-di-go.. Di-go-go-di-go” (88) and an *ekwe* carried the news to Umofia and beyond, it shattered the silence of the night. The eldest man of the clan who was once upon a time a great warrior, Ezeudu is dead. Hence ancestral spirit or *egwugwu* appeared from the underworld, speaking in an unearthly voice and later when guns were fired as the last salute to the departed soul came in a commotion of shouts of horror as the dead man’s young son of sixteen years who has participated in his father’s funeral lay in a pool of blood. “Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart”(91). This accidental killing was considered a sin named female crime which was “against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land”(91) to his mother’s land before the cock crowed to return to the clan after seven years. The very next morning Okonkwo's house was to be destroyed and set to fire as an act of cleansing the land as Okonkwo was polluted with the blood of a clansman. Hence his family must be exiled and is forced to move to Okonkwo's mother's native village, Mbanta.

Obierika, an intimate friend of Okonkwo stores Okonkwo's yams in his barn and wonders about the old traditions of the Igbo culture. He is the one who mutely questions the death of Ikemefuna and suffers as his new born twins were once thrown to the evil forest. It is he who supports Okonkwo during his exile and carries the bags of cowries which he had received from selling Okonkwo’s yams and seed-yams. Obierika passes the news to Okonkwo regarding the arrival and initial atrocities of the missionaries. Though the white man was once upon a time seen in their region and the natives considered him a leper because of his colour. After the departure of Okonkwo from his father’s/native soil; great changes take place and the missionaries occupy the land and establish their government in Umofia. During Okonkwo's second year Obierika visits him and reveals sad news that the village of Abame was completely

destroyed by the white man. He recounts that once a white man rode into the village on a bicycle and the elders of Abamenoticing the arrival of an alien consulted their Oracle, which told them that the white man would destroy their clan and other clans. Consequently, the villagers killed the white man. But weeks later, a large group of men slaughtered the villagers in retribution and as a result the whole village of Abame wasthen deserted.

Though Okonkwo was well received by his uncle who was the only surviving member among his mother's siblings, Okonkwo was not happy. Uchendu tried his best to console his nephew. Okonkwo works hard and later flourishes even in Mbanta, but the Anglican missionaries strongly impact his life. Six missionaries travel to Mbanta and through an interpreter named Mr. Kiaga, the missionaries' leader, Mr. Brown, speaks to the villagers. The missionaries speak to the people about Christianity and tell them that their God was the Creator of all in the world and the natives worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone, with the aim of converting the residents of Umuofia to Christianity. Mr. Brown does not allow his followers to antagonize the clan. Mr. Brown is the first white Christian missionary in Umuofia and Mbanta. He is patient, kind, understanding and open-minded man who is willing to make an effort to respect and understand the Igbo beliefs and tries his best to have peaceful relationship with the natives. He visits many great men of the clan who begin to listen to and understand his message. He also discusses religious beliefs with Akunna, a clan leader of Umuofia. Though neither man gave up his belief, they learn about each other's faith and gain respect for one another. Mr. Brown builds a school and a hospital in Umuofia. He urges the Igbo people to send their children to school by bribing them with simple gifts. Mr. Brown tells the Igbo people that their future leaders will have to know how to read and write. When the missionaries try to convince the natives and sing to attract people. Okonkwo believes that the man speaks nonsense, but Nwoye who is dejected by the murder of Ikemefuna and is reluctant to accept the so called masculine qualities of his father; and is angry, unsatisfied and unhappy with the Igbo customs and traditions is too captivated by the song, though he doesn't understand a word of it and after repeated attempts to talk to the missionaries finally becomes a convert of Christianity and takes the name of Isaac. He leaves his father's hut and later starts teaching in a school and decides to convert everyone in the family to the new religion.

Many of the sufferers of the native Igbo culture are strongly attracted to the new found religion that they became ardent followers. When the Christian missionaries request for a piece of earth to build their shrine, the native grant them a piece of the Evil Forest thinking that the Christian missionaries would run away fearing their gods. But on the contrary, the missionaries built a church and when nothing happened to the missionaries, the people of Mbanta conclude that the missionaries possess extraordinary power and consequently the church succeeds in winning several converts. Theefulefu, the weak and worthless men of the village, including a woman who had lost several children as they were born twins, soon convert to Christianity. The missionaries then go to Umuofia and start a school and Nwoye joins them.

When Okonkwo's exile is over, he arranges to return to Umuofia having great future plans to marry again and have many more children and gain the highest title. Though he is unhappy with Nwoye he decides to be strict with other children. His daughters have grown to be very beautiful young girls that Okonkwo takes pride as a father. Before leaving Mbanta, he organises a huge feast for his mother's kinsmen as a token of appreciation of their gratitude during his years of exile where “three goats were slaughtered and a number of fowls. There was foo-foo and yam pottage, egusi soup and bitter-leaf soup and pots and pots of palm-wine” (121).

Finally when Okonkwo returns to his father's land, the great hero's return has no significance and Umofia is now a changed place. Many men have renounced their titles and have converted to Christianity. The white men have established a government and have started administering in Umofia. They have built a prison; a court of law, where people are trailed and punished for breaking the white man's laws. Okonkwo wonders why the Umuofians have not incited violence. Meanwhile Mr. Brown becomes ill and is forced to return to his homeland, Reverend James Smith becomes the new head of the Christian church. He is highly intolerant towards the customs of the native clan.

There is a clash of culture during the annual ceremony to honor the earth deity when an overzealous convert of Christianity, Enoch dares unmask an egwugwu whose each member represented a village of the Umofian clan. This act is equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The unmasking of the egwugwu; and the killing of royal python, provoke the natives to seek revenge. Violence erupts and in retaliation, the egwugwu burn Enoch's compound and then destroy the Christian church of Reverend Smith's to ground.

When the District Commissioner returns to Umuofia the next day, Reverend Smith complains against the natives and when the commissioner learns about the destruction of the church, he requests the six leaders of the village, including Okonkwo, to meet him. The men are cordially invited and prompted to accept their action in front of other members. Unknowing of the fact that they are accused of crime, the leaders explain their action and once their acceptance of guilt is heard, in no time the leaders are hand cuffed and thrown to jail where they brutally receive physical and mental insults. Their heads are shaven; they are given no food and water for days and they do not dare to speak to each other. The white men had strict judicial system which punished the crime unlike the native tradition which considered killing to be an act of man's bravery. The jailed men are told that they would not be released until they pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. The people of Umuofia collect the money and pay the fine, and the men are finally set free.

After the prisoners are released, the clansmen hold a meeting and decide to meet the clan the next day. The next day at a meeting, five court messengers approach in the uniform and bring the order that the meeting has to be stopped. Okonkwo is angry and hence he jumps forward and beheads the man with his machete and in turn expects his fellow clan members to join him in uprising. When Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to support him and his ancestral traditions and beliefs have fallen apart, he commits suicide by hanging himself.

When the District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo's compound, he finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself. Obierika and his friends lead the commissioner to the body and Obierika explains that suicide is a grave sin and hence according to their custom, none of Okonkwo's clansmen may touch his body. Obierika tells him,

“It is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen.

His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers”(151).

The commissioner, who is writing a book about Africa, ironically believes that the story of Okonkwo's rebellion and death may be included as a paragraph or two. He has already chosen the book's title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

The life of Okonkwo who was once upon a time the greatest warrior in Umuofia comes to a tragic end. When Okonkwo is under the strong clutches of the colonial rule, he is reluctant to yield and yet, he is unable to fight. The surrendering of his life seems to him to only option to manifest his rebellion. The fall of Okonkwo is symbolic of the fall and disintegration of the Nigerian culture. Though many evil customs had to be wiped off and emancipation through education and knowledge was the need of the hour, yet the culture which had many good practices and strong beliefs is crushed, squashed and diluted as if they have no voice and significance before the powerful authority and therefore the beliefs, customs and traditions of the Nigerian culture have fallen apart. The postcolonial rule is solely responsible for the things to fall apart. Achebe being a Christian and strongly influenced by the Anglican culture reveals both the positive as well as negative elements of both the cultures and reveals through his novel the pathetic plight of the indigenous warriors and the loss of traditional beliefs.

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