

THE CULTURAL CONFLICT AND STRUGGLE OF THE IGBOS: REREADING CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

The word 'tribal' came from the word tribes, which mean a group of people living at a particular place or region from times immemorial. Tribes are named differently at different places according to their geographical positioning, their social stratification, their own tradition and culture in the society and so on which makes them distinctive from others. Tribes are rich in their culture, customs and folk tradition etc. Many novelists involved the tribal culture or tribal issues in their writings. But no other novelists like Chinua Achebe ever portrayed the tribal culture and life so lively. He was a trend setter in such practices. Most of his novels deal with the tribal issues in postcolonial point of view. In his novel it can be seen that the indigenous people inheriting their culture and tradition even after being affected by colonial force. In postcolonial writings Africa was still in darkness. The world had seen the unseen from colonial point of view. As soon as Achebe's Things Fall Apart published the notion about Africa was changed. In the writings of Achebe the originality of the aboriginal was exposed. In Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God the cultural clash between the native and European has been depicted.

Keywords: Tradition, culture, indigenous, inheriting, aboriginal

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe, the trend setter of postcolonial writing had produced many novels dealing with the culture of the African tribes. During the colonial period the Black were represented as they were depicted by the White Europeans. To get a clear image of Africa and its people would have been quite difficult without Achebe. Earlier even in the writings of Conrad we saw a different image of Africa as it was seen from European point of view. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* he adapted the narrative technique in which Marlow was the narrator. Marlow described the Congo and the life of the natives from his point of view. But in his writings the smell of the nativity is prominent. In his novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe tells the story of how an Igbo village in the Niger region first encounters Christian missionaries and British colonial forces. He tells this story mainly from the view of the colonized, though in the language of the colonizers. This fact is noteworthy as it underscores Achebe's aim, not to say his mission, as a writer:

“What I think a novelist can teach is something very fundamental, namely to indicate to his readers, to put it crudely, that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from the Europeans.” (qtd. in Gikandi 24).

Accordingly, two thirds of “*Things Fall Apart*” is dedicated to the depiction of the way of life, the cults and traditions, beliefs and social rules of the villages of Umuofia and Mbanta before the intrusion of the white man. Achebe's initial objective of writing the novel is because he wants to make his readers aware about the value of tribal culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* provides readers an immense scope with an insight of Igbo society as it was right before the white missionaries' invasion on their land. The invasion of the colonizing force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society and life; from religion, traditional gender roles and relations, family structure to trade. The intrusion of Christianity had stirred the Igbo society.

Discussing about the changes between colonial and pre-colonial Igbo world needs a close reading of the text by tracing the historical background. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe describes the history and background of Igbo community; he does so by unfolding both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made the community different from Western or European cultures. For example, their firm beliefs in the power of ancestral gods, the sacrifice of young boys for the sake of welfare, the killing of twins and the oppression

of women to name a few. In the text of *Things Fall Apart*, the reader is also made aware of the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia as well as the reactions of Igbo to their arrival. Although the influx of the missionaries had some benefits to Igbo, there were also a number of challenges which were going to be faced by the Igbo community.

Things Fall Apart's story is told in a cyclical fashion, including Okonkwo's early years in Umuofia, his seven-year exile in Mbanta, and his final return. One of these times in Okonkwo's life is covered in each of the novel's three parts. A gendered narrative framework that follows Okonkwo from fatherland to motherland and back to fatherland is likewise mapped onto the novel's three sections. Okonkwo's continuous fixation on his own masculinity is contrasted by this gendered narrative framework. Okonkwo experiences constant emasculation despite his best efforts to rise in social standing and establish himself as a model of traditional Igbo manhood. Okonkwo continuously engages in confrontation with his community as a result of his desire for recognition, which ultimately results in his own demise as well as Umuofia and

nine villages. The focus of *Things Fall Apart's* first section is on Okonkwo's coming-of-age and his efforts to separate himself from his father Unoka's disreputable legacy. He never wanted to be like his father. Okonkwo has earned a spot among the titled men of Umuofia thanks to his relentless labour and unwavering determination as well as his local notoriety as a wrestling champion. He earned his own reputation. However, Okonkwo's passion often gets the better of him, as evidenced by the time he executed Ikemefuna, a little boy who had grown to be his adopted son after being given to Umuofia by another town in order to end a violent conflict. An elder by the name of Ogbuefi Ezeudu cautions Okonkwo not to "have a hand in [Ikemefuna's] death" when the clan elders decide it is time for Ikemefuna's execution.

Despite this caution, Okonkwo ultimately uses his machete to attack his surrogate son out of panic: "He was scared of being weak." Other times in Part One, Okonkwo demonstrates that he lacks patience with his kids and is quick to get angry with his wives. He finds himself in a dangerous social position because of his fixation with upward mobility and traditional masculinity, which tends to alienate others.

Part One offers a comprehensive overview of the pre-colonial Igbo cultural environment in addition to detailing Okonkwo's attempt to establish a reputable name. To give the reader a

flavor of the Igbo world, Achebe highlights a variety of Igbo cultural values, religious beliefs, and ritual activities. However, at the end of Part One, Okonkwo's life and the life of his community are both on the verge of calamity. The death of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, the village's eldest man and the one who warned Okonkwo not to kill Ikemefuna, deals the first blow. The second blow occurs when Okonkwo's gun accidentally discharges at Ezeudu's nighttime burial, killing Ezeudu's 16-year-old son. The foreboding homicide of Ezeudu's son compels the village elders still there to set Okonkwo's house on fire, kill his livestock and send him and his family into the exile for seven years.

Okonkwo, who was exiled for committing a "feminine" (i.e., unintentional) offence, retreats from his fatherland to the territory of his mother's ancestors, a move that Okonkwo finds to be profoundly debasing. As white Christian missionaries start to colonize the lower Niger region, including Umuofia and Okonkwo's exiled city of Mbanta, this individual sensation of emasculation reflects more significant cultural and historical shifts. When an old acquaintance from Umuofia visits Okonkwo in Mbanta to let him know that his eldest son, Nwoye, has given up traditional Igbo beliefs and converted to Christianity, the feelings of personal and historical emasculation reach a boiling point. Okonkwo disowns Nwoye after realising that this incident represents a significant break in his patrilineal line.

By the time Okonkwo and his family depart Mbanta, Umuofia has already experienced significant internal strife due to the foreign population that is increasing there. Along with the missionaries who had come during his absence, government representatives also start to trickle in, establishing a foreign system of law. Okonkwo's return home, which he had anticipated would signify a fresh beginning, is compromised by the changes in Umuofia. Okonkwo becomes increasingly enraged with his fellow Umuofians for refusing to take aggressive action against the missionaries and drive them out as he finds himself in a passive, emasculated position once more. Okonkwo views the British as a cancer whose existence will ultimately kill Umuofia and the nine villages, in contrast to others who commend the British for increasing access to resources, as well as medical and education.

Following yet another humiliating event in which colonial officials imprison Okonkwo and others and set a high bail, Okonkwo adopts an unwavering stance in support of tradition. His violent final acts—murder and suicide—completes the novel's tragic ending. Once again, gender

is at the heart of this tragedy. An intended killing is considered a "male" crime under Umuofian law. Although Igbo tradition does not specifically classify self-harm as a "feminine" crime, Okonkwo's suicide is an abhorrent act that deprives him of all honour. The final act of emasculation is thus brought about by his suicide because he will not receive the honour of a decent funeral.

The approach of Homi K Bhaba is very relevant. Due to his dual focus on the necessity of paying attention to cultural variables and considering them as driving forces in the creation of postcolonial studies, Bhabha treated the colonial and postcolonial phenomena from a fresh perspective. Considering the rise and fall of Okonkwo, there are many issues to be discussed. First of all cultural clashes may be one of the important issue. Before arrival of the colonial power the atmosphere of the Umofian clan was undoubtedly peaceful. It was flowing smoothly along with their inheritance and tradition as well. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel immediately realized the essence to be a hero in his society, that's why he always wanted to be different from what his father was. His father was coward and spendthrift who died in disrepute, leaving many village debts unsettled. So, naturally Achebe depicted the character, who sprung up from the soil of Umofia like a phoenix. His struggle to be a real man was mythical. Along with his tribal world he was quite happy. But neither could he accept the colonial culture nor he forgot his own. This cultural encounter had driven him towards a tragic character.

The 1890s setting of *Things Fall Apart* depicts the conflict between the indigenous Igbo culture and the white colonial administration of Nigeria. The stereotyped European images of native Africans are demolished in Achebe's book. He takes effort to accurately depict the sophisticated, complex social organizations and cultural traditions of Igbo culture that existed before the European contact. He takes care to avoid stereotyping Europeans, though, and provides a variety of white characters, including the largely charitable Mr. Brown, the fervent Reverend Smith, and the coldly pragmatic District Commissioner.

The first white Christian missionary to Umuofia and Mbanta is Mr. Brown. He is a kind, understanding, and patient man. Additionally, he has an open mind and is prepared to try to appreciate and comprehend Igbo beliefs. As proof of his shared belief with the Igbo people in the need of harmonious relations, Mr. Brown prevents too enthusiastic church members from inciting clan members. He makes friends with a lot of the clan's finest men, who start to pay



attention to and comprehend his message. With Umuofia clan leader Akunna, he also talks about his religious convictions. Both men maintain their religious convictions, but they come to accept one another and learn more about one another's faith.

In Umuofia, Mr. Brown constructs a school and a hospital. He makes it a point of presenting presents like singlets and towels to the kids (and later the adults) who attend school and exhorts the Igbo people to send their kids to school. The Igbo people are informed by Mr. Brown that reading and writing skills are a requirement for their future leaders. He is aware of the British approach, which calls for the overthrow of the Igbo people's traditional government and the establishment of their own. Mr. Brown warns the Igbo that they must change if they want to maintain their traditional values and level of autonomy.

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