

The African Identity – Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Achebe’s Things Fall Apart is a demonstration that the African people were not ignorant as misinterpreted by the Europeans. Achebe wished to assert the strength of his people’s past which gradually developed into a cultural conflict when Africa was colonized. He rejuvenates the Igbo culture and tradition and exposes the racist ideology of the white man. He exposes the rich past of Africa. It is this dignity that many African people lost during the colonial period and wished to regain it. The novel regenerates the traditional past, myths, religion, custom and traditions. The novel portrays the social and cultural impact after colonization. It also provides the tradition values and the loss of the values due to the rigid norms of the society.

Keywords: Rejuvenate, Igbo, Racist, Colonization, Ideology.

Things Fall Apart depicts the social and cultural ethos of Africa before colonization and was thrown into darkness by colonial forces. Igbo society lost its cultural values and the self-identity in Igbo society was considered insignificant. The novel has three parts. The first part of the novel celebrates the innocence that is symbolized by the Umuofians. It depicts the life of the inhabitants of Umuofia with respect to their political, cultural, and sociological aspects and affirms the dignified African past. A totally untainted pre-colonial Africa is portrayed in the first part of the novel. The second part of the novel portrays the disintegration of African traditional values and loss of innocence after the arrival of British missionaries. The third and last part of the novel is about the destruction of native traditions on the Umuofian world. The novel ends with the tragic end of the protagonist after his exile for a period of seven years.

The Igbo society is bound by laws of nature blended with religion and rites in the consciousness of the people. The clan believes in the messages of the numerous gods and goddesses. “This religious faith of the Igbo is at the centre of their culture and civilization and history, holding them together along with their ways and values of life. It can be said that Igbo society has a strong spiritual dimension, controlled by gods, ancestors, personal spirits or Chi”. (Meitei 46) Thus, they have a pantheon of gods and oracles with which they establish a complete agreement. The Umuofia culture has a strong bond with a number of deities that keep the cosmos of the tribal world protected from bloodshed. They consult the Oracle to know about their future.

Okonkwo, a self-made man is presented as a heroic protagonist. He had to start his life from the beginning to achieve name and fame in the Igbo society due to the failure of his father, Unoka. He hates his father to such a great extent that he also hates his father’s values like love and compassion. He loathes his father’s lack of masculinity which makes him stay away from the clan. “As a tragic hero he has some flaw in him.

Achebe suggests as well the flaw, or flaws in his nature - his inordinate ambition and his refusal to tolerate anything less than excellence, taken in conjunction with an impulsive rage to which he easily gives way and which produces irrational responses to situations".(G.D. Killam 146)

Okonkwo is banished from the clan for the sins committed against goddess earth and the clan. His beating of his third wife Ojiugo during the Week of Peace, the killing of Ikemefuna and the accidental killing of Ezeudo's son during the funeral are the sins committed. His son, Nwoye finds his father's action unbearably inhuman and he seeks a more humane community among the Christians. Nwoye, develops an aversion towards the rigid customs of his own society and embraces Christianity for universal love. He feels that the actions of his as brutal and rejects his entire society. Thus, Nwoye "stands as a symbolic negation for his father, the living denial of all Okonkwo accepts and stands for" (TFA14). This results in the clash of the traditional value and Christianity which ultimately leads to the doom of Umuofian traditional way of life. Okonkwo who very much embraced the traditional way of life was shocked to see his son as the first convert to Christianity. Okonkwo's individualism shatters the foundation of the society he represents and the fragile universe he had built for himself had crashed in ruins. "Achebe wrote this novel ... basically for humanity at large with a view to enlightening all the people, including all those who colonized and those who were colonized and also those who stood by nonchalantly or helplessly watching the show, about what Africa was in the pre-colonial era and what ravages at individual, social and political levels were caused to it in the colonial one."(Prasad 86)

It is during his exile that Okonkwo learns, from his friend, Obierika, that the new religion, Christianity, has been taking an upper hand into the traditional stronghold of Igbo society. The impact of Christianity, in all cases, was devastating. It made the converts leave their faith and embrace the new religion. The missionaries began to question the very basis of tribal society and insisted that the gods that the tribesmen worship were "false gods, gods of wood and stone"(TFA131).

The new religion was the beginning of colonialism in Africa. Nwoyefelt a sense of security in the voices of love and brotherhood. The inhuman practices and superstitious belief helps Nwoye find his way into the new church as a refugee. The impact of the new religion affected the various factors in the traditional system. Nwoye's conversion symbolizes the way in which Christianity strikes at the very heart of tradition. For the first time doubts the natives are sceptic about their religion and they begin to realize that a strong streak of anarchy is present in their culture itself.

The District Commissioner best represents not only the power of the British Empire, but also this indifference of the process of change; he tells Okonkwo and others in the community: We shall not do you any harm ... if only you agree to co-operate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy ... in the domain of our queen, the most powerful ruler in the world (TFA175).

Okonkwois humiliated along with five others and arrested by the District Commissioner. He realizes the loss of his dignity and self-respect. Okonkwoholds a meeting with the remnants of the clan to decide what is to be done against Bruisers. At the same time a messenger appears with a message to halt the meeting. He becomes emotional and kills the messenger. The people do not support him because they realize the futility of their confrontation with the powerful force of colonialism. Okonkwo senses the end ofself-respect of the Igbo society. Okonkwo takes his own life in the face of the inevitable consequences. Okonkwo's suicidesymbolizes his refusal of a new religion as well as the collapse of the traditional values which he represents.

Okonkworeflects the tragedy of the oppressed. He prefers to reveal the darker side of both traditions as well as the better side and leave us to draw our own conclusion. Achebe's work appears to be a plea to the Nigerian society to meaningfully review its roots and origin without sentimental idealizing, and to attribute proper value where it is due, and to see how far these values can be appropriately restored or reasserted in the context of the present day." (Cook 68) Achebe reveals the good and evil of the African society.

Conclusion

A culture can retain itself only if there is a synthesis and if it can assimilate other cultures. If it is rigid it would transform into mere anarchy. While Achebe emphasizes adaptation but is at the same time worried at the loss of dignity of his culture. As a disinterested and neutral observer Achebe succeeds in exposing the good and evil prevailing in the native African culture and an alien culture.

Abbreviation

TFA Things Fall Apart.

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