

Colonial Frame Work in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: An Oeuvre

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Abstract:

The spread of imperialism in Africa has created areas of political influence and domination which naturally produced a far-reaching influence in the growth of African Literature. English, French and other European languages became a part of African culture and literatures of the western world provided models for the African writers. But the native sensibility retained its identity, though layer of foreign influences became a part of African Literature. African literature of today successfully presents the conflicts and contradictions within the African society and also provides a glimpse of things in future. Colonialism meant the beginning of the process of Europeanisation. Africans confronted new values and habits which always did not fit into their cultural background. Africans were judged on the basis of European norms and values by the colonial powers. The African writers have drawn the attention of the world on the predicaments faced by their people, and they have presented the different facets of African heritage in their writings. In spite of their respect for the traditional values, the African writers of today do not like to revive everything which is old. The African writers have adopted an enlightened outlook and they know what to take from the non-African cultures.

Chinua Achebe has emerged as the doyen of modern African writing in English with the publication of his first major novel, *Things Fall Apart*² (1958), which has been acclaimed by the world as 'a classic in modern African writing in English', is a worthy archetype of the novel which shows the tragic consequences of Africa's encounter with Europe. The paper highlights the colonial concepts in *Things fall Apart* in a translucent way.

Keywords: Feminist literary criticism, gender dynamics, phallogocentric ideologies, somatic self, docile body

Introduction:

The African novel, in general is known for its depiction of various cultural tensions and conflicts arising out of a clash between tradition and modernity, the real and the occult and so on. But it is the conflict between the individual and the society

and the way in which it is resolved, that seems to lend a typical African flavour to the African novel, thus distinguishing it from its European counterpart. Chinua Achebe's comments on colonial fiction and on the role of the African writer suggest that he was himself aware when he was writing that he was creating a new literature. While studying at Ibadan, he says, 'I read some appalling novels about Africa, and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well-intentioned'. In an article entitled *The Role of the Writer in a New Nation*, he enunciates, "In the face of colonial derogation, the prime duty of the African writer in the first few years after independence was to restore dignity to the past, to show 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."¹

Chinua Achebe has emerged as the doyen of modern African writing in English with the publication of his first major novel, *Things Fall Apart*² (1958), which has been acclaimed by the world as 'a classic in modern African writing in English', is a worthy archetype of the novel which shows the tragic consequences of Africa's encounter with Europe. In *Things Fall Apart*, the Carys, and Conrads of Colonial Africa are represented by the District Commissioner whose own version of the story of imperial conquest is to be told in a book entitled, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (p.187) a book in which Africans are to be represented as primitive savages, and the destruction of a sophisticated culture rendered as 'Pacification'. Achebe subverts and dismantles the racial codes of this paradigmatic colonial text entitled by contextualizing it in an alternative discourse-one which seeks to restore 'dignity and self-respect' to 'African People'. For Achebe's own version of the story – *Things Fall Apart* – tells of the tragic consequences of imperialism, of the destruction of a culture which manifested 'great depth and value and beauty'.

Things Fall Apart was written and published in the years immediately preceding Nigerian independence in 1960, a transitional period when political power was being transferred from the colonial masters to Nigerian male elite. *Things Fall Apart* legitimizes this process whereby women were excluded from post-colonial politics and public affairs through its representation of Pre-colonial Ibo society as governed entirely by men. In Hassoldt Davis's review of Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, he states, "No European ethnologist could so intimately present this medley of mores of the Ibo tribe, so detail the intricate formalities of life in the clan".³ Milton S. Byam wrote of *Things Fall Apart*, "This is a tale grounded in folklore rather than a novel..."⁴. Donald Herdeck avers, "*Things Fall Apart* has become the most famous novel written in English by an African"⁵.

In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays a stunning moment in African history—the imposition of colonial rule—with sympathy and dignity, focusing on the complexity and integrity of pre-colonial Igbo life, and the turmoil resulting from British rule. A 'Classic' in every sense of the word, it has become the single best known African novel around the globe, translated into at least 45 different languages. The novel, *Things Fall Apart* is a faithful record of his transitional but turbulent period of African history vis-à-vis Nigeria, whose cultural identity with the advent of Christianity and colonialism came under direct attack till things in the culture fall apart. This is the central theme of the novel. The book thus has immense sociological and historical importance, for it explores the basic cultural patterns and social past of Nigeria. Achebe's deep awareness of the rhythm of his country or African life and of the sense of negritude that leads him to grapple with the theme of racial conflict and interracial relationships (within the given culture itself) is compounded with his sense of historicity. The book, thus, embraces the entirety of Achebe's culture and is an examination of the phenomena that have already taken place, which would mean the recreation of the moment, the race and the milieu through the writer's cultural and racial memory. The book is like a fossil shell which gives a basis for a better understanding of the book and what the writer wants to communicate.

Although *Things Fall Apart* may appear to be exclusively concerned with the imposition of colonial rule and the traumatic encounter between African and Europe, it is also a work that seeks to address the crisis of culture generated by the collapse of colonial rule. Indeed, Achebe has constantly argued that the theme of colonial domination in Africa—its rise and influence—was made imperative in his works by his concern that the culture of colonialism had had such a strong hold on African peoples, especially on a psychological level, that its consequences could continue to haunt African society long after European colonizers had left the continent. *Things Fall Apart* is Achebe's attempt to depict and re-create the culture of pre-colonial Africa, a culture of great philosophical 'depth', 'value', 'beauty' and 'dignity' of its own. He has achieved this not by writing of African cultural traditions in a self-conscious, sociologist's manner, but by creatively evoking each of the different rituals and ceremonies of the Ibo community in their most essential form. In part I of *Things Fall Apart*, for example, seven chapters, one after the other focus on the various festivals and ceremonies observed by the Umuofia tribe about whom the story is. What contributes to the naturalness of the depiction is the fact that the different ceremonies are not reported as general, abstract facts but are presented as the direct experience of the characters in the novel themselves. Thus, there is the Feast of the Yams that the families of Okonkwo and other villagers participate in to celebrate the occasion of harvest. Again, the wrestling match is held between the young village boys, one of whom is Maduka, the son of Obierika, an important character in the book. The Ibo Engagement and the Wedding ceremonies are presented in the engagement and wedding ceremonies of Obierika's daughter. The Ibo Funeral

ceremony is captured through the ceremonies conducted at the death of Ezeudu, the oldest inhabitant of Umuofia. Similarly, the Ibo way of settling disputes is depicted in the setting of the marital dispute between Odukwue and his wife. Thus, as the general is depicted through the particular, the cultural history of a particular community in a particular point of time and space comes alive with vividness and verisimilitude. Connecting the different episodes and descriptions of rituals in the book is the underlying story of Okonkwo, a brave and outstanding warrior of Umuofia, who aspired to become one of the lords of the clan but failed because a major transformation took place in the tribe's way of life and value system as a result of the colonization of Africa. The portrayal of communal activity, popular superstitions and beliefs, the communal response to the events of grief and joy is necessary in the book, not merely for its assertion of national dignity, but also because the story of Okonkwo's life has meaning only in relation to the community of which he was a member. The life of the Umuofia community is not idealized or romanticized. For, while it is certainly shown to be an important, 'advanced' (culturally advanced, that is) society with its fairly complex and developed sense of social hierarchy, functions, rites, rituals, duties, sense of justice, peace and discipline, it is also depicted as a society whose injunctions border on the inhuman and harsh, sometimes making it difficult for the meek or the unfortunate to accept them intrinsically. Twins, for example, were considered to be a violation against nature and therefore if born to someone, had to be left to die or to be eaten up by birds, animals, in Evil Forest; the mother's feelings in the matter always being of little consideration. The Tribal code did not however emphasize strength (of mind and body) alone. Rather the tribal ideal was a balance between the male and female aspects (representing the 'harsh' and the 'gentle' aspects respectively) of nature, as determined by the collective conscience of the community. For example, to kill Ikemefuna, a lad from the neighbouring clan, to atone for the murder of 'a daughter of Umuofia' by a member of the former clan, would be justice. But Okonkwo killing Ikemefuna when the latter had begun calling Okonkwo 'father' during his three years' stay with him is a violation of the traditional code: "it is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families"⁶.

As the story unfolds, one realizes that Okonkwo is guilty a little too often of violating the tribal code. For, he appears to have completely misunderstood the tribal ideal of equilibrium between strength and gentleness. Over-reacting to the reputation of Onoke, his father, derogatorily nicknamed by the clan as *Agbala* meaning 'woman', he has made a fetish, an obsession of his pursuit of strength. Quite erroneously, he has begun to believe that to show affection is to be weak. That Okonkwo is wrong is suggested in the contrast provided in the character of Obierika, also an important man of Umuofia and a counterfoil to Okonkwo. While Obierika treats his children and wives with understanding, tempering discipline with affection, Okonkwo even when he dearly loves his family (this is quite obvious in the scene

where his favourite daughter Ezinma, is carried away by Chielo, the village Priestess), he rules with an iron hand (indeed, it is his strictness which alienates his eldest son, Nwoye, from him). In Okonkwo, the pursuit of the ideal of strength is so imbalanced, that it prompts him to be merciless both towards himself and towards others. He cannot eat for two days after killing Ikemefuna, yet (despite Ezeudu's warning) he participates in the boy's killing (p.51) because he feels that not to do so would amount to 'weakness'. His life is one long anxiety to achieve social honour through valour and courageous deeds. Twenty years ago, he had won the wrestling match from the hitherto invincible champion, Amalinze the Cat; he had also led Umuofia in two wars. The tribe believed that one would do well if one's yams were cracked by one's ancestors, but everybody knew that Okonkwo's yams had been cracked by himself. He had achieved social status through hard work and discipline alone. This had made him proud and intolerant sometimes of those who were weak and unsuccessful. On one occasion, he even insults a member of the clan for his poverty and the elders rebuke him and warn him against pride (p.24). Again, when during the *week of Peace*, for a very small cause, he is enraged with his wife and he thrashes her, he is punished by the village elders for disturbing the community's peace. He is, one realizes, always being corrected by the village elders for his excesses. This highlights the main "flaw" in his nature and contributes to the human portrayal of Okonkwo's character. Okonkwo, too, always accepts the community's sentence on his misdeeds. That a great man like him is not spared by the law of the clan speaks for the highly developed concept of justice among the tribes, the tribes that were later to be labelled as 'uncivilized' and 'barbarous' by the white man.

In spite of his failings, Okonkwo is the hero of the novel. He is the man who achieves a certain status in society by dint of sheer effort. The Ibo society which 'respected age but (it) revered achievement', reveres Okonkwo who had truly risen to his present status from the position of a very poor young man left in heavy debt by his father. He is an example to the clan of what men may achieve if they tried. Okonkwo is a very brave and disciplined member of the clan and if he makes mistakes he also gracefully submits to communal justice as is the custom of the land. He is a great man because all his life he had consciously worked towards the perfection of his character to achieve the ideals of the Ibo community. His choice of death by suicide (a socially degrading mode of death) symbolizes his despair and his unwillingness to live on in a once-great community now become 'soft like a woman' (emasculated) by the colonizer's religion and way of life which has altered the traditional ideals and values, and by the new (capitalist) economic system of the British that has brought prosperity to the former barter society.

The novel also tries to explore the reasons for the collapse of the strong tribal way of life. For one thing, as Toynbee has pointed out in his book, *A study of History*, "cultures once born, do not continue to evolve automatically but have to be

rejuvenated periodically”⁷. This regeneration occurs through an interaction or encounter with another culture. Should the challenge provided by the alien culture be met with adequate response, then a ‘genesis’ of the challenged culture world results. However, should the challenge from the new culture prove too strong for the old culture, then the latter may succumb to the new culture. In such a case ‘though individual members (rise) to the occasion, the society as a whole (can) not resist the tide and its identity (is) submerged in an alien culture and an alien religion.’ We can see how this comes to pass in the society of *Things Fall Apart*. In one scene towards the end of the novel, Obierika and Okonkwo are discussing how the white man has successfully brought about the downfall of the tribal civilization: “...The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.”⁸

Matters were not so simple however. The old way of life had grown decadent and required to be updated. Thus, the tribe had failed to comprehend. Consequently, when threatened by the new ways of the colonizer, the tribe had succumbed to the threat and challenge posed by the white man. The position of the colonizer in Africa was further strengthened by a powerful white government in the background, a government that punished the natives severely for any offensives-even just ones-levelled against the white man. This display of ruthless, colonial power is best exemplified in the episode involving the District Commissioner and the six clan leaders from Umuofia (pp.174-177) which is a warning both to the clan leaders and to the tribe of the wide powers of the district Commissioner and the futility of attempting a fresh assault on the white man’s superiority. Besides, the advantages of a capitalist economy and the agencies of social welfare such as hospitals and schools, make the people unwilling to go to war against the people who have brought these much needed benefits to them for the first time. Thus, the tribals’ warrior spirit had been successfully tamed, enslaved ‘colonized’ by the white man. It is this realization that dawn on Okonkwo when he finds the people unresponsive to his lone cry of war against the colonizer. Instead, the large crowd stands aside to let just four messengers, coming from the commissioner with an order to halt the meeting immediately, pass. In this act of spiritless submission to the new power, Okonkwo sees the death of the tribe. He, the epitome of the tribal notions of self-respect and dignity, is unable to accept the humiliating transformation in the tribeman’s psyche and decides to put an end to his life, a life that had been consciously spent in the quest and defence of the tribes’ cherished ideals. All this Achebe has conveyed in *Things Fall Apart* with sensitivity, realism and economy of language.

In Africa, the practice of selling and buying of land is not known and ownership of land is based on membership of a person in a community which does

the clearing of land collectively and the land is given to each family. About this also there is a strong reaction from Okonkwo and Obierika who are talking about a land dispute which is settled by the white man in favour of Nnama's family, "who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter" (p. 159). In fury Okonkwo reacts: "Does the white man understand our custom about land?". His friend replies: "How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? 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" (p. 160). These intricate social and cultural systems explain the book's theme and principal points at issue.

Much of the tribal ethos has been evoked through the use of Ibo proverbs occurring both in the narrative and in the dialogue of the characters. The meticulous use of proverbs and also sayings in *Things Fall Apart* is done in an exemplary manner. The theme and climatic development of the plot and the essential tension the book conveys and the portrayal of the central character especially, in close conformity with the stage of the novel's growth are subtly indicated by the proverbs. The proverbs "A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing" (p. 19) and "Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad day light, then know that something is after its life" (p. 182) basically express one and the same idea, that whenever there is something unusual in the movement or decision of people, then it is enough to suggest that there is some obvious reason. The proverb "whenever you see a toad jumping in broad daylight, then know that something is after its life" refers to the fall of the traditional culture of Umuofia in face of the advent of the white man's religion and cruel laws. Achebe poignantly expresses the prevailing fear and uncertainty of Umuofia with the help of animal imagery: "Umuofia was like a startled animal with ears erect, sniffing the silent, ominous air and not knowing which way to run" (p. 177). The toad, in the proverb, is a symbol of the terror-stricken natives of Nigeria and that something after it is, the white colonial aggressor. Achebe writes like an Ibo himself telling a tale; in such a re-telling both the narrative and the quoted dialogues would contain Ibo proverbs because for the Ibo people, "proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten" (p. 6). The absorption of the Ibo idiom into English makes it possible for Achebe to effectively convey as distinct an experience as the African in a language that is of the British originally. Almost any example from the novel would illustrate this. The two lines below are a sample:

When Okonkwo and Obierika got to the meeting place there were already so many people that if one threw up a grain of sand it would not find its way to the earth again. ... The Earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger, Okonkwo said, "A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm." (pp. 181-182)

The ending of *Things Fall Apart* also illustrates the dichotomy of interpretations which cultural backgrounds impose upon a reader. Most western readers of Achebe's novel seem to interpret the story of Okonkwo's fall as tragic, if not close to pure tragedy in classical terms. Achebe's own feelings about Okonkwo and the conclusion to the novel, however, would tend to indicate a rather different interpretation. The most obvious clue is Achebe's title, *Things Fall Apart*, taken from William Butler Yeats's poem, *The Second Coming*. Although Yeats's title may be applied ironically to Achebe's story, the indications are that Achebe views the new dispensation as something inevitable, perhaps even desirable. His criticism is clearly of the old way of life which is unsatisfactory now that the west has arrived.

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