
The Post-Colonial Reality in Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

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ABSTRACT

Literature, as an impersonation of human activity, often portrays a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. In literature, we find stories intended to depict human life and activities through some characters that, by their words, actions and responses, transmit specific messages for the purpose of education, information and stimulation. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is probably the most authentic narrative ever written about life in Nigeria at the turn of the twentieth century. When it was first published, Achebe declared that one of his motivations was to introduce a real and dynamic society to a Western audience who perceived African society as primitive, naive, and backward. Unless Africans could recount their side of their story, Achebe believed that the African experience would forever be "mistold," even by such well-disposed authors as Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad who have described the continent as a dusky place dwelled by people with stolid, primitive minds. Achebe, perhaps the most authentic literary voice from Africa, he wrote not only to record the African, especially Nigerian, life but to analyze the reality experienced by the native people in different times and situations. The novel *Things Fall Apart* describes the Igbo people at a truly seminal stage in their history and culture: as colonial forces apply pressure, their entire way of life is at stake. These looming colonial forces basically declare the end of everything they know, representing huge changes to the way they exercise religion, their family unit, the roles of gender and gender relations and trade. Colonial forces don't just mean foreign control; rather there's an impending doom which is instantaneous and calamitous and which is something that Achebe examines head on. In this regard, the paper is an attempt to show Achebe's endeavor to portray the post-colonial African reality in all its varied colors and textures and to find out the extent to which this novel faithfully mirrors the postcolonial impress that shadow the hopes and aspirations of the community that he belongs to.

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the nineteenth century most European states migrated to Africa and other parts of the world where they set up settlements. Nigeria was amongst other African countries that received guests who were on a conquest delegation; presenting their religion and culture that is later forced on Igbo. The culture of the people of Umuofia (Igbo culture) is tremendously undermined by this alteration. Achebe's main goal of writing the novel is his desire to teach his readers about the worth of his culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* gives readers a real vision of Igbo society right before the white missionaries' intrusion into their land. The attack of the colonizing power undermines to change almost every part of Igbo society; from religion, politics and culture to economy. Consequently, Achebe accuses the white missionaries' colonial laws and/or invasion for the post-colonial mistreated Igbo culture; this

persecution can be observed in terms of the abused social cohesion between people and their society. Before Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, all the novels that had been written about Africa and Africans were written by Europeans. Mostly, the European writings depicted Africans as savage and barbaric individuals. *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, by Joseph Conrad portrayed Africa as a wild, dark, and uncivilised continent. Following Conrad's novel in 1952 was *Mister Johnson*, a novel by Joyce Cary who described the novel's protagonist Mr Johnson generally as a childish, semi-educated African who reinforces colonialist stereotypes about Africa. In light of the portrayals of Africa and its people by both Conrad and Cary, it does not surprise anyone that Achebe and other African authors started to stand out and narrate their story of Africa and its people. With his depiction of Africans in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe defies how Africans formerly have been described in European literature. In one of his

lectures, he contends that Europeans have perceived Africa as “the other world” (Achebe, “An Image of Africa”, 1978, p.15)¹. Joseph McLaren claims that *Things Fall Apart* was written “at a time when the most prevalent works of fiction about Africa were written primarily by Europeans”² (Joseph McLaren, 2012, p.19). Majumder alludes to E. B. Tyler, an anthropologist, whose work is believed to be objective. Tyler writes the tourists, after reaching the impassable countries [in Africa] and seeing no police system available in their own countries, come to the direct conclusion that the cannibals live there as their wishes. We think it is a wrong belief, because, in these ‘uncivilized’ countries there are severe rules and regulations in each stages of life³ (Majumder, 2007, p. 137). Achebe’s objectives are obvious from the beginning; he wrote to teach and to disintegrate the prepositional vision Europeans had of Africans. The novel has gotten much consideration among critics for this reason. McLaren writes that “[b]y portraying the cultural life of the Igbo [...] Achebe was able to counter Western images of Africa”⁴ (Joseph McLaren, 2012, p. 24). Furthermore, Alison Searle observes that “Achebe scrupulously creates the sense of a rich and coherent social fabric that has formed its own ideas about whites and their culture”⁵ (Alison Searle, 2007; p.49). She continues to contend that Achebe rotates the narrative perspective from what had formerly been the standard: “Instead of gazing through the eyes of the European, the text displaces the assumptions of imperial narrative, and grants the terms of reference and mediating perspective to the usually suppressed ‘other’.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The main goal of Chinua Achebe was his society, more exactly, the fate of his people, they pertained as an authentic record of the changing African world. In his opinion, the writer must be in charge of his society. To him it was silly to consider art as a pure

and independent being coming into existence by itself in an aesthetic void. Accordingly, his aim was to make his fiction an instrument of awareness seeking to elevate the social reality to a higher level because in the traditional African sense, art is in the service of man⁶ (Achebe, 1978, p. 9) and the artist is a representative of his community, behaving as the conscience of his society. So the literary artist should face the reality and direct his comrades to see themselves as others see them. Edward Said argues that “Most interesting post-colonial writers bear their past within them- as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future” (Edward, 1993, p.34)⁷. So it is through the visions of *Things Fall Apart* that the world turned out to be more appreciative of Africa and its people and at the meantime the reality embracing the stereotypical ideas that once existed about Africa started to surface in a much clearer light.

METHODOLOGY

In this research the qualitative descriptive method has been used to achieve the set objectives of it; to identify The post-colonial reality in Chinua Achebe’s Novel *Things Fall Apart*. It is argued that this method is adequate because the results are introduced in a descriptive manner. Data has been collected from various sources, consisting of primary and secondary references. The research is limited to the selected novel of Chinua Achebe. The first step in this study lays down the theoretical framework. To do this, reference has been made to different sources that are related to the topic. Second, a review of previous studies in a synthesized manner has been done. Third is identification and description of the background of the novel that is under study, which preceded an in-depth reading of them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the writing of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays the history of Igbo; he does so by depicting both the straightness and weaknesses of their culture and traditions that made them distinct from Western cultures like their beliefs in the power of ancestral gods, the killing of twins and the persecution of women to name a few. In the novel, the reader is also made aware of the white missionaries’ coming into Umuofia as well as the responses of Igbo to their arrival. Although the arrival of the missionaries had a few advantages to Igbo, there were also a lot of

1 C. Achebe. (1978). An Image of Africa, *Research in African Literatures*, 9 (1), 1-15.

2 McLaren, Joseph. (2012). *Things Fall Apart: Cultural and Historical Contexts In Critical Insights: Things Fall Apart*. Ed Keith Booker. Massachusetts: Salem Press, 19. Print.

3 Majumder, Samiran Guha. (2007). Africa: Ouponibeshik Bonam Ouponibeshiter Chukhe – Prekshit: Ram Nath Bishwasher Ondhokarer Africa. Ouponibeshbad O Ouponibeshik Path. Ed. Fakrul Chowdhury. Dhaka: Raman Publishers. 127- 141.

4 McLaren, Joseph. *Things Fall Apart: Cultural and Historical Contexts. In Critical Insights: Things Fall Apart*. Ed Keith Booker. Massachusetts: Salem Press, 2012. 19-32. Print.

5 Searle, Alison. (1 (2007). The Role of Missions in *Things Fall Apart* and Nervous Condition. *Literature and Theology*. 21.: 49. LibHub. Web. 27 February 2017.

6 C. Achebe. (1978). An Image of Africa, *Research in African Literatures*, 9 (1), 1-15.

7 Edward Said. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. New York: Knopf.

challenges that faced the religious, political, cultural and economic reality of Igbo.

The Post- Colonial Political Reality

The Political Reality was highly changed by the Europeans. In Africa, there was an elected council that served as government. Their government was more or less democratic. When the Europeans

told the countrymen of the king that would now be their ruler, the Africans thought it was bizarre. They attempted to tell the European men about their council, but the white men simply neglected it. They declared that the king possesses all land, and will permit the Africans to live on it because he cares for their matters. The Africans thought this was abnormal because they had worked and struggled highly for their land and it was theirs. Although colonial rule was unpopular with most of the locals, some widely cooperated with the Europeans for certain benefits. Some were thankful to the Europeans for freeing them from slavery and war. Others considered that the Europeans taught Africans competences that would enable them to be improved socially and economically.

The white men also imparted a government and “[t]hey had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance”⁸ (Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*, 1958, p. 164). The District Commissioner comes into a foreign country and randomly begins establishing new laws that the natives must comply, and if they reject to obey them, they are condemned to jail where they are addressed as slaves. Men could be rebuffed and discarded in jail for tossing twins into the evil forest, although this was a habit that had to be practiced by the principles of their own society. Men of title and who are of high respect in the towns are held as slaves for disobeying the white man’s rules and are obliged to serve personal missions for the District Commissioner like gathering wood and clearing the compound. Disregarding and disrespecting highly honored men.

The white man's government plays a vital role, not only with its court and its "court messengers" but also with its jail and its executions. These transformations are narrated by Achebe in a sarcastic mode, as if the foundation of a government by the white missionaries

was the Igbo’s' first meeting with government, as if the Igbo did not have a justice regulation before the coming of the colonizers. This way is very cynical because, earlier, Achebe made great efforts to clarify not only the diversities of justice parcel out by the Oracle (Okonkwo's expulsion) and by the general citizenry (scolding about violating the Week of Peace and about women not helping in the recuperation of a lost cow), but he also shows the procedures followed and the sorts of justice implemented by the formal court.

Keep in mind that one of Achebe's objectives in writing this novel was to show that the Igbo had built up an advanced society, religion, and justice system long before the Europeans came.

By hiring other locals African - the kotmas, or court messengers- to be their agents in the everyday requirement of their dominion, the white men carry into their interest people with skin color and language characteristics much like the local natives; people who appear to be companions of the countrymen (though their dialect was clearly different). Eventually, the court messengers manhandled their status by abusing prisoners and taking bribes. Achebe is explaining that defilement among the Igbo people isn't restrictive to Umuofia; the court messengers are more concerned in what they can benefit from the situation rather than what they can do to spread Christianity or even to help the Umuofians.

The court and the troubles it creates to Igbo society explain the collision of two societies and the overwhelming effects of colonizing a country. On the one side, there is Igbo society, its traditions and habits, which, according to Syed Fagrutheen is “heavy in traditions and laws that focus on justice and fairness”⁹ (Syed Fagrutheen, 2014, p.22). On the other, there is the new government of the missionaries who arrived to execute their own laws and traditions, which divides the village of Umuofia.

When Okonkwo reveals to Obierika that his mate Umuofians should fight against the British, Obierika wisely comprehends that it is too late. Many Umuofians have already "joined the ranks of the stranger." Obierika says that the white man "has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" — the first specific acknowledgment of the book's title, *Things Fall Apart*.

⁸ Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Random House,

Inc. New York

⁹ Fagrutheen, Syed. (2014). Downfall of Traditionalism in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. *The English Literature Journal*. 1(1), 21-37. LibHub. Web. 27 February 2017.

4.2 The Post-Colonial Economic Reality

Concerning the post-colonial economic reality, we can say that before European colonization, it can be clearly seen in the novel that the economy depended on farming which had a major impact in Ibo culture. The major harvests that Ibo people develop are yams. Yams went hand in hand with social

class. The more yams that you have, the more regard and esteem you get from others. During the raining season yams are cultivated. The yams are held in tee-pee formed hills so that the rain has a trough for the water to flux around. Toward the end of the raining season and the close beginning of the dry season the yams are reaped and sold in the market. With the Ibo village the people would reap their yams and take them back to their compound and construct yam barns. By building the barns it guaranteed families a permanent food outfit during the dry season. Not only do the Ibo people depend on the yams to ensure food but they also depend on palm trees for their drink. They flip palm trees in order to get their drink. The result of this procedure is palm wine which is excessively drunk at ceremonies and casual dinners.

The Ibo people respect extremely the earth since it gives them nutrition. The village plows and uses everything they grow indicating how much regard and appreciation they have for the earth. They don't underestimate anything realizing that the earth is not always going to be so open-handed and give them a plenty of nourishment for their starving families. Clearly in this pre-colonial period, manufacturing has not taken over and the Africans are maintaining themselves on subsistence cultivating which rotates around the idea that one should only produce enough food as one requirement for oneself. This encourages everybody in the clan to eat as much food as they need. Contrasted with the post-colonial Africa, the Marxist model has been deserted and a more industrialist approach has been adopted. Western companies motivate cultivators to plant much more than they require and to sell their merchandise on the open market. This goes in accordance with postcolonial criticism because Achebe refuses the concepts of universalism and that a universal ideal representation, such as excess goods being sold on the global market, is applicable to all human beings. Because of the European conquest of the Achebe people, they have forfeited their freedom and their honor in choosing how to manage their own food, which is contributing to their decaying culture. Another literary critic, Gikandi, disagrees:

‘... the yam was essential to agricultural production among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, and that it had,

together with palm oil, been a major part of the regional economy before the discovery of coal at Enugu. In those days it made sense to see African life as the movement from primitive (agricultural)

practices to industrial production, and we were thus not interested in questioning the logic of this narrative of modernity’¹⁰ (Gikandi, 2010, p.4)

Although Gikandi displays the importance of palm oil and yam in the Marxist economic system, he hikes up the “discovery of coal” as the propeller that causes the Igbo people to industrialize and lose their culture.

The Post-Colonial Religious Reality

The religion of the community in *Things Fall Apart* is Igbo, but in this story, Christian missionaries come to convert the natives to Christianity. These two religions are very different.

Since animals are frequently used as sacrifice, they support and simplify the natives’ religious traditions. This is not the only case of how religion is a natural element of everyday life to worshipers of the Igbo religion. In Achebe’s portrayal of the Igbo model, it is obvious that Okonkwo has the chance of expressing himself spiritually at home: “Near the barn was a small house, the ‘medicine house’ or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits” (13). Being spiritual and religious is essential for the whole society, because it “unites everyone into a clan, giving them a sense of purpose and attachment. Its religion connects the people to the heavens, the earth, and the land and places everyone in the social order”¹¹ (Levine, 1999, p. 136). A clear example of this can be seen in the village’s communal meeting, where two families come before the Ekwugwu to make a contention. The Ekwugwu are villagers that dress up as masked ancestral spirits, each one substituting one of the nine villages of the tribe. No one realizes the identity of the masked ancestral spirits, but we understand that Okonkwo is one of the nine Ekwugwu. The Ekwugwu, which behaves like a court, permits both sides to defend their side and then they come to a mutually acceptable decision. The ancestors, or the living-dead, are principal personages

¹⁰ Gikandi, Simon. (2016). Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Culture. *Research in African Literatures* 32.3 (Autumn 2001): 3-8. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 278. Detroit: Gale, 2010. Literature Resource Center. Web. 30 Mar.

¹¹ Levine, Alan. ((1999). Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as a Case Study in Nietzsche’s Transvaluation of Values. *Perspectives on Political Science*. 28(3), 136-141. LibHub. Web. 6 March 2017.

in the Igbo community. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu demonstrates how the African community contains the dead, or the living-dead, since a person who has kicked the bucket “remains

an active participant in the religious life of the community”¹² (Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, 2010, p.51). The Igbo communities organize ceremonies in their honour; the villagers sacrifice and respect them in their everyday lives, which can be exemplified by the breaking of the kola nut “As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies” (p. 6). This method of leaking the dead in the community is distinct from Western customs. In Christianity, it is normal to pray directly to God thanking him for blessing you with food and blessing the food you are about to eat. However, in Igbo religion you pray to your ancestors. The ancestors are still seen family members and are expected to affect the gods and goddesses in your grace, which is clarified in *Things Fall Apart*, where Okonkwo’s behavior towards the ancestors can be observed. He ratifies that the ancestors are able to influence the prosperity of his family: “He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm-Whine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children” (p. 14). Igbo society has an intense feeling of community and the community’s order is always in the service of the individual’s happiness. The priest of the earth goddess calls in on Okonkwo for beating his wife during the week of peace when furious because she has ignored her obligations as a wife and not cooked his meal, which could probably have destructive outcomes for the whole tribe: We live in peace with our fellows to honour our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will not grow. You have committed a great evil. [...] The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish. (p. 29). Even in punishment by the gods and goddesses, the whole community will be punished for the mistake of one person.

On the other hand, in Christianity, there is one all-powerful god. This god is the eternal being who created and preserves all things. Christians believe God to be both transcendent (wholly independent of, and removed from, the material universe) and immanent (involved in the world). God

¹² Asamoah-Gyadu, J Kwabena. (2010). *The Evil You Have Done Can Ruin the Whole Clan: African Cosmology, Community, and Christianity in Achebe’s Things Fall Apart*. *Studies in World Christianity*. 16(1), 46–62. LibHub. Web. 27 February 2017.

for them is there to save them from their sins and to save them from this life. For the Igbo culture this is strange because this life and land is their whole life. A single god doesn't seem enough to them, especially when this god has no relation with agriculture and their traditions. As the

missionary addresses the clan through a translator, he answers their questions about his belief. Two questions exhibit clearly the differences, firstly in relation to the monotheistic (having only one god) element of Christianity:

An old man asked: ‘Which is this god of yours,’ he asked, ‘the goddess of the earth, the god of the sky, Amadiora of the thunderbolt or what?’

The missionary answers that plethora of gods the clan has, are not gods at all and there is only one true God: the God of Christianity. The second question were asked by another member of the clan about how they will be protected from the wrath of these neglected deities and the ancestors if they worship this new god. Then the missionary responds:

‘Your gods are not alive and cannot do any harm’, replied the white man. ‘They are pieces of wood and stone’.

This is received by ridiculous laughter by the clan, because; for them their gods are absolutely not harmless. However, these two principal matters become incredibly interesting when we think about the effect of Christianity on tribal religion, as we can notice the massive gulf in understanding that exists between the two groups. The missionaries, by attempting to impose Christianity, set themselves up against beliefs that go to the very core of the tribal religion and thus bring tremendous conflict.

The Post- Colonial Social Reality

Africa was impacted socially by European colonization. In the book *Things Fall Apart*, by Chinua Achebe, we can see clearly the social reality the colonizers brought to African clan. Mr. Achebe introduces the way of life before the missionaries come and then registers some of the transformations, which happened because of the changed faith system presented by these white men. Soon after the missionaries started to teach the native people about the Christian belief, their tribal traditions started to be doubted. This caused a kind of turmoil in the village. The colonizers were attempting to fetch with them new styles of life, and mostly better life styles.

In war times, there are no indications of pity for other human beings. Okonkwo was the first man in the town to bring home a skull from Umuofia’s latest war, adding his fifth human head to his accumulation

with the hope to gain more. Okonkwo uses his first skull as a cup which he drinks palm-wine from at great occasions (p. 10). To Westerners, drinking from a skull that you have gained

in war might seem primitive. Frantz Fanon, says: "For colonialism, this vast continent [Africa] was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals- in short, the negro country"¹³ (Frantz Fanon , 2001, p. 170).

Mr. Achebe tries to demonstrate that the colonizers proved to people who were harmed by the convictions of the clan that this did not need to go ahead in their religion. This is one of the fundamental reason people were converted to their religion. Mr. Achebe also demonstrates that the clan had numerous destructive convictions before the missionaries arrived. The Umofia people trusted that twins were evil and should be thrown away right after birth. They believed that sacrifice was a good way to achieve peace.

They had a lot of other customs that appeared to be common to them but we would find them sketchy at the least. They thought the forests were evil and many superstitions. When the missionaries came to their land the people hated them. Over time the missionaries built trust among the people and began to teach them truth. They told the Umofia that the forests weren't evil.

As the villagers began to recognize truth from superstitions, those who remained became very angry. The Ibo culture began to fall apart. The missionaries, Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith educated the women who were leaving their twins to die in the evil forest not to do so. For instance, there was a girl named Nneka who had given birth to several sets of twins. She through them away in the evil forest as she had been taught to do; her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found out she had fled to join the Christians. It was a good riddance (p.151). This demonstrates to us how Mr. Achebe interpreted what was going on and wasn't surprised when the women escaped to the Christians, he didn't blame people who were being harmed by the clan's convictions and ran away from the clan looking for a better life; they really had no option if they didn't want to live in scare and superstition.

Achebe portrays the everyday life in an African village, thereby showing the glamour and perplexities

of Igbo society, Fanon maintains that "there was nothing to be ashamed of in the past, but rather

dignity, glory and solemnity. The claim to a national culture in the past does not only rehabilitate that nation and serve as a justification for the hope of a future national culture."¹⁴ (Fanon , 2001, p. 169). This optimism is shared by Achebe who uncover the great past of Nigeria through the genuine portrayal of the pre-colonial Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*. He celebrates the fact that "there was nothing to be ashamed of" in the pre-colonial past of the Igbo. Nwoye notes that "anthropological reports on the Igbo were accomplished during the hey-days of negative colonial practices when the perspectives of all African peoples were treated in great disdain..."¹⁵ (Nwoye , 2011, p. 304). Now Achebe has recuperated the perspective, which is basically a native perspective, through the characters having their own voice in the novel. The characters mirror their own socio- cultural principals that are disintegrated down after the colonizers' coming to Igbo land. They set forward their ingenious values that comprise of both exactness and blemishes, before the readers who judge how pitilessly that values have been smashed by colonialism.

CONCLUSION

In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe employs his life experiences, through portraying Igbo culture and the colonizers' authenticity. He introduces a detailed version into everyday African life in a village with a powerful sense of community. He personally knows the rituals, conventions and religion of Igbo people, which enables him to precisely catch these parts of Igbo society in his novel which is a serious postcolonial novel that specifically defies for instance Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe straightforwardly demonstrates the perfections and complications of both Igbo society and the missionaries and everything that the missionaries carried with them, such as the Christian religion and the Western rules. Tossing twins into the evil forest and the treatment of the Osu are cases where Achebe is critical of Igbo traditions, while the education that the missionaries introduce is a case of a positive side of the missionaries' landing. Language is not only interesting for Igbo people, but also for the novel itself. The fact that Achebe wrote in English demonstrates that he proposed for his novel to be read by Westerners, while the fact that some Igbo

¹³ Fanon, Frantz. (2001). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

¹⁴ Fanon, Frantz. (2001). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

¹⁵ Nwoye, Chinwe M. A. (2011). "Igbo cultural and religious worldview: An insider's perspective." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(9): 304-317.

words and expressions are untranslated exhibits that he knows the significance of language inside Igbo community. He balances

between making Igbo community accessible and understandable by translating some proverbs, expressions, and folktales, while in the meantime trying to keep up the authenticity of Igbo people by not translating others. The utilization of language combined with the depictions of morality and rationality, which question previous portrayls of Westerners as ethically and intellectually superior to Africans, makes the novel interesting from a postcolonial point of view.

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