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The Novel as Anti-colonial Counter Narrative: Interpreting Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: This paper will explore and analyse the distinct aesthetic modes/strategies through which Achebe negotiates and contests the European stance on Africa, Africans and African culture. In detailing the textual aspects and their significance, the paper will also argue how Achebe created an alternate historiography, challenging existing versions by colonial texts/ideology

Keywords: Achebe; Things Fall Apart; Africa; Igbo Society

Things Fall Apart (1958), by the renowned Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe is the most famous and widely read African novel in English. It is the most memorable account in English of an African culture and explores the traumatizing effects of British colonialism on a small Nigerian village at the turn of nineteenth century. It also played a major role in African self-understanding, published two years before Nigeria declared independence from Great Britain as Nigeria was under British control from 1906 until 1960.

Things Fall Apart is set at the beginning of the twentieth century, soon after the European and the British authorities, missions and trade scramble for Africa and traditional Igbo society began to undergo cultural disintegration. In addition, it can be read to seek, recover and celebrate the author's recoding of the Igbo past, the challenge to western modes of understanding history and to the British imperial account of African history. Modern African writing in English has established its presence and reputation in the last more than thirty years. It has achieved significant audiences throughout the world. G.D Killam says:

Like all literatures, African literature is an end in itself, it reveals a human need to create, to make discoveries about the greater potentialities of self which satisfy man, thus it needs no special justification. (Killam12)

Most African literature is a representation of the crisis within the African society which has never been assessed properly by the world earlier. Africa had to suffer under the colonial rule for a long time and it still suffers under the vestiges of colonialism. Infact, the colonial rulers ruthlessly exploited the African nations. A critic has stated:

The traditional value structure of the African societies was shaken to the very foundation with the entry of the colonial powers into the African continent. The relation between the individual, society and government underwent a radical transformation, and as a result of this, several maladjustments appeared between the individual and group in the African society. (Pratima 18)

Colonialism meant the beginning of the process of the Europeanization. With the contact between African and European cultures, there developed a confrontation between the new values and the old norms, which troubled the structure of these so called, 'black heathens' or 'Africans'. Jomo Kenyatta has summarized the effects of colonialism in Africa, by pointing out the dialectical conflict between the European ideas and the age old norms of African cultures. Africans did not oppose everything from Europe, yet they disliked the way they were treated by the European powers outside and within Africa. The native sensibility retained its identity in the voice and works of African writers such as Achebe who consider it their duty to depict the predicament faced by their people. African intellectuals were able to feel the pulse of the changing times and the temper of the 20th century world. Pramita opines:

African literature of today successfully presents the conflicts and contradictions within the African society and also provides a glimpse of things in future. (Pramita 19)

Most African writers such as Chinua Achebe, Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo felt that

literature has a social function to interpret and educate society and did not turn their backs on their own cultures but have faced up to many problems-political, social, educational and cultural-and have sought solutions for them in an imaginative form. G.D. Killam observes:

African literature seeks primarily for and to the people of its own country, and expresses their hopes and fears and aspirations. (Killam XII)

African literature is a serious intellectual and cultural activity and it has been an instrument of instilling social awareness and national consciousness. It projects the African reactions to those inhumanities and injustices, imposed on the blacks by the hostile forces of slave-trade and colonialism. In a number of places, Achebe has expressed his views on "the unique situation in which the modern African writer finds himself. This situation is the result of 'chance-encounter' between Europe and Africa during the imperial-colonial period" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 132). He sums up the colonizer's attitude thus:

So these African creatures have no soul, no religion, no culture, no history, no human speech, no I.Q. In total, it was a denial of the human mind and spirit to the African. (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 132)

Chinua Achebe is probably the most widely read among the contemporary African writers, both on the African continent and abroad. His fictional and critical pronouncements have profoundly influenced his readers' understanding of Africans and their lives. He presents an artistically faithful image of concrete historical events in his fiction. His novels cover the entire colonial history of Africa, from early days of European advent to the post-independence chaos, highlighting the confrontations, conflicts and complexes of this period. Achebe's fiction explores the organic connection between life and history and offers an unusually authentic and accurate picture of the fluctuating fortunes of his society and the consequent social and moral problems of his people. He perceives the great transformations of history as expressions of popular life. His works portray how the historical events affect everyday life and how the socio-cultural and political changes affect the people who react immediately and violently to them, often without understanding their courses. G.D. Killam remarks:

Achebe achieved artistic success through an effective dramatization of certain crucial moments in history. (Killam 3)

As a student at Ibadan, Achebe had read several accounts and representations of Africa in

the writings of the European novelists, anthropologists and colonial officers, who have shown African culture as inferior and he realized that it was a vital cultural necessity to fight and rebel against this view of the African culture as described by Europeans. He undertook the task of asserting the worth and value of his traditional society and the role of the writer as a spokesman and activist. They were pressed to emphasize the basic values of their society which reconcile the individual to his past. The writer's role should be that of a social transformer and revolutionary. He says, "The African writer cannot therefore be unaware of or indifferent to the monumental injustice which his people suffer". (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 79)

According to Achebe, the African writer should be both, a cultural nationalist, explaining the traditions of his people to a largely hostile world, and a teacher instilling dignity into his own people. As he remarked in his 1964 lecture, "The Novelist as Teacher", "here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse- to help my society regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-denigration" (Achebe 204). He denied that the writer is alienated from his society. In relation to the issue of anti-colonial resistance, it is imperative to recall the work of Frantz Fanon, who has exercised great influence on writers, and thinkers of different nations and cultures.

Fanon is an important figure in the field of post-colonial studies and central to any discussion of anti-colonial resistance. He was the originator of the violent, unmistakable, clear reaction in challenging European power and its resources. Fanon's powerful arguments were made from under the shadow of domination; it spearheaded a narrative of liberation and the possibility of revolt against the European colonizer. In 1950, emerged an important work of Fanon, *Black Skins White Masks* that attempted to record the psychological damage suffered by millions of colonized people. He was of the opinion that colonialism is psychopathological, a disease that distorts human relations and renders everyone within it 'such'. Fanon argued that in fact colonialism was the cause, which engendered psychic difference along racial lines and destroyed the black subject into nothingness. Fanon was called by his comrade-critic Albert Memmi, the most important anti-colonial writer-activist, a 'prophet of the third world', a romantic hero of decolonization in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Memmi 37). Influenced by contemporary philosophers and poets such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Aime Cesaire, Fanon's publications include two polemical books-*Black Skin, White Masks*, and *The Wretched of the Earth* that dealt angrily with the mechanics of colonialism and its effects on those who were oppressed.

Fanon was forced to see himself, not as a human subject, with his wants and needs but as an object and was considered as inferior, less than fully-human, placed at the mercy of their definitions and representations and he felt abbreviated, violent and imprisoned in a way as he denied to see himself as an object rather than a human being. In 1954, enraged by the attitude of the French colonizers against the people of his colour, he became a revolutionary rebel, anti-colonialist and joined the Algerian rebels in the fight against the French colonizers.

In the chapter on 'National Consciousness' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon speaks of the importance of rescuing history from the colonizer's custody in the face of European denials of any worthwhile native culture or history. Fanon argues that the process of colonization involved not only physical occupation of the land and imposition but also the grave psychological and cultural damage the colonized suffer.

That 'Africans didn't hear of civilization for the first time from the Europeans' (Achebe 157), as Chinua Achebe declared, is a claim central to many works by ex-colonial writers in the early stages of contesting a colonial mentality. Achebe, declaring his agenda, sees this as one of the main messages carried in his historical novels *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Africa has been a victim of greatest denial and contempt, seen as 'the Dark continent', and as Fanon puts it, the home of 'barbarism, degradation and bestiality' (Fanon 212). The portrayal of its historical and cultural richness has been the task of African novelists throughout the continent. Achebe believed along with Fanon that such a restoration of the past was an important factor in giving colonized people the confidence to create a future without European viewpoint and a nation capable of future achievements. Achebe strongly responded to and rejected the European perspective that Africans were incapable of creating a civilization or anything worthwhile.

Achebe's fiction concerns itself with the recovery of past and to create a sense of identity among the African people. His most significant novels like *Things Fall Apart* can be read as alternate histories which both challenge colonial narratives and give voice to those stories which have been ignored or suppressed by European historians, ethnographers and writers. Achebe has written bitterly about his sense of anger and outrage on reading *Heart of Darkness* as a college student and finding how Africans are characterized- as cannibals, as having no speech, as a mere mass of savages indulging in unspeakable rites.

As stated above, Fanon argues that the process of colonization involved not only physical occupation of the land and imposition of

government on the colonized people, but also mental colonization (Fanon 43). In his view an aggressive and violent attack on colonial oppression is necessary to release the native subject from self-denial and inferiority, something that involves the active role of intellectuals and artists.

In 1952, as a university student, Achebe encountered Joyce Cary's much praised *Mister Johnson* (1939). Achebe's anger at Cary's racist-colonialist representation of Africa is a much cited incident but cannot be ignored, for it compelled a frustrated Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart*. As Achebe asserts, the story of Africa was something that "...could not be told for us by anyone else, no matter how gifted or well intentioned" (Achebe 123). *Things Fall Apart* is recognized today arguably as one of the most significant counter-narratives of the twentieth century.

The modern African writer is a carrier of traditions established by his predecessors. Achebe grew up at a time when Africans were not only opposing European rule through political action but also beginning to question with increasing vigour and clarity, the cultural assumptions used to justify that rule. Up till 1960, the year of independence, the literature written about Africa tended "to reinforce generally the assumptions of the British and helped them to defend colonial rule as an agent of enlightenment to primitive people without a valid civilization of their own" (Lindfors 3).

Achebe, while portraying the social, cultural and religious patterns of the Igbo society, devotes more than half of the text to portray the myths, beliefs, legends, customs, superstitions and taboos of the society. It is as if he has taken upon himself the moral role of a teacher or an interpreter to retrieve his race and whatever has been misrepresented by dominant Eurocentric forces. As Wole Soyinka observes, the situation in most African countries needs a double retrieval, "first from the colonial deniers of their past, but also from the black neo-colonial deniers of their immediate past and present" (Soyinka 14).

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe is primarily engaged with retrieving the history of his race from the imperial deniers of his past. In this respect he seems to have conceived his role as one of addressing in his fiction the social, political and religious concerns of Africans. The religious beliefs and superstitions are given prominence in this novel; not only are these significant part of community life but because they are later challenged and broken down by the Europeans. Igbo being an agricultural society and because of their dependence on land, the African people have lived closely and in harmony with nature. They respect the seasonal changes with an almost religious fervour.

They have their own judicial system to settle disputes and punish offenders. Their social

and cultural practices are governed by various beliefs and superstitions; the birth of twins is considered evil, description of the 'ogbanje' or evil children, outcasts are buried in the evil forest, Igbos are not allowed to shave their hair and python is considered a revered creature and to kill it is a sin. Polygamy is not considered an inferior practice in Igbo society. A man may have wives according to his wealth and status. The protagonist of the novel Okonkwo had three wives, eight children and each wife had a separate hut.

Marriages and feasting ceremonies form an important part of Igbo culture and society. Feasting is associated with times of harvest and the most important among them is the feast of New Yam as it signals the beginning of the new farming year and the meeting of kinsmen. The lives of these people are governed by beliefs in gods, goddesses and ancestral worship whose omnipotence they dare not challenge. Achebe also points out the evil side of the society in the form of the ruthless laws of a tribal society; its treatment of women and children and the custom of discarding new born twins etc. represent the evil and the backward aspect of tribal society.

Okonkwo, the central character is a figure who represents the whole society and his tragic end is symbolic of the fall and disintegration of an ancient Igbo society. He is exceptionally brave man in every sense. Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond, his fame rested on solid personal achievements. He is a man of titles, has large acres of land, can afford to have many wives and is contrary to his father Unoka, who was a very lazy person. It is not merely the tragic flaw in Okonkwo's character that brings his end but also his obsessive hatred of white men whom he fears and who will tear his own culture apart.

Okonkwo's downfall and banishment from the tribe begins with his offence committed against the earth goddess. To kill a clansman or to beat a wife during the week of peace was an offence against earth goddess. Although Okonkwo had accidentally killed the son of his kinsman Ezeudo during his funeral, but he accepts the punishment imposed on him by the community and it is the turning point in the novel. Okonkwo submits to the law of the tribe in accepting his banishment from Umuofia, something even he cannot challenge, however strong or powerful his identity.

Things Fall Apart is built on a rising structure of cross-cultural conflicts. Each conflict cuts into and does damage to the edifice. By the time it reaches the final act, the collapse has already been assured. The conflict between two cultures begins with the arrival of Missionaries and the main source of conflict is religion as it is the most important determining factor in the society. The Christian religion runs into conflict with the

traditional culture and it becomes evident when Okonkwo returns to Umuofia. He finds that the white Missionaries have begun to educate the natives about the falsity of their own gods and religion. They told them that the gods they worshipped were false gods, gods of wood and stone.

Their speeches captivated many free born young lads including Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, who had been lured by their talk and became a convert. When the free born who joined the church started mixing freely with the outcasts who formed the bulk of converts in those days, it was considered by their elders as contrary to their tradition and they said, 'The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man who joined it' (TFA 123). This reference was to Ogbuefi Ugonna who being a titled man and well respected in the village, 'had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the christians' (TFA 123)

The missionaries along with Christian religion have by this time also established the church and their government to judge the cases against the natives. Some of the natives are imprisoned and subjected to the indignity of clearing the ground, fetching wood for the white commissioner. They are pained at such treatment and they sing:

Kotma of the ash buttocks,
He is fit to be a slave
The white man has no sense,
He is fit to be a slave (TFA 161).

This song shows nothing but the hatred the people had for the foreigner. Okonkwo is enraged to hear such incidents. In the words of Obierika, the white man has acquired power by dividing their clan, by driving them apart with his religion and turning their own kinsmen against one another and they have taken away their power to fight back.

Okonkwo and the leaders of Umuofia were not ready to tolerate it and wanted Umuofia to mould in the traditional image and they decided to contest the church, government and religion of Missionaries. As a consequence, he has to stay in prison and is humiliated. But when the very existence and dignity of the tribe is threatened, he is ready for war and continues to resist, but in reply:

"It is already too late...our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the strangers (the white man), and they have won our brother, 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" (TFA 159-160).

Throughout the rapid changes that occur in the last part of the novel Okonkwo is grieved but powerless. He is a symbol of resistance but the forces of change are more powerful than the native resistance. Being powerless, Okonkwo commits suicide, which is not only the main character in the novel, but is also a symbol of the old order. He symbolizes traditional values as hunting, farming, respect and worship of ancestors and gods. Okonkwo will not submit to the brutalization of the colonizer and the destruction of old values. His death shows that things have indeed fallen apart when the might of the white man triumphs. His act of hanging himself is the final one of despair. The old society dies with Okonkwo, but it is not a natural death; it kills itself as Okonkwo does. The difference however is that Okonkwo's suicide is necessitated by the collective suicide of the people of Umuofia when they refuse to fight. Both the new religion and the colonial administration acting together have subdued the Igbo people. The society surrenders itself through submission to the white man, whereas Okonkwo kills himself because he sees this submission as a sign of moral collapse, and because he himself will not submit, he cannot live any longer.

The ending of *Things Fall Apart* is both ironic and tragic, in that Okonkwo's suicide is a signal of the coming phase of colonialism that will follow all over Africa. The District Commissioner

on the other hand discusses his tragic hanging as peculiar enough to warrant a "reasonable paragraph" in his book *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Niger*. For him, the momentous event in African history is dismissed as merely an act of a weird, uncivilized people with strange customs. This is an instance of unconcerned and uniformed colonialist position. One of Achebe's main tasks in writing his literary histories of Nigeria is to counter the prejudiced view of the white officer and to inform the elite bourgeoisie of Africa and elsewhere that Okonkwo's act was one of protest and courage rather than of "primitivism". It is Okonkwo's great friend Obeierika who says: "that man was one the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog" (TFA 187). Achebe thus presents the past and the latent perspectives; the official history and the oral tradition. For Achebe, the artist is the recorder of his peoples' history and by doing so, retrieves their racial identity in order to assist the modern African society to better understand their present and future. In Achebe's own view, stories like those of *Things Fall Apart* are a reflection of the glory and despair experienced by tribal communities. These experiences require a subtle and critically well-informed handling by the creative artist to set the record straight in contesting the colonialist claims about native traditions and cultures.

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