

Cultural Identity Loss of the Main Characters in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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ABSTRACT: Identity and culture are considered to be the relevant aspects of the post-colonial literature for two reasons: First, because they are so central to the growing power of imperial discourse over the nineteenth century, and secondly they remain central and unavoidable facts of the modern society as known as the dominant parts of the social discrimination and prejudice. Africa has a unique cultural heritage with a distinct past. African Literature often makes assumptions about the existence of the unified 'African' culture, but closer inspection reveals a far more complex and a problematic picture. It reflects the cultural traditions, colonial history, and inner conflicts of African people. While drawing together a wide variety of theoretical and critical perspectives of post-colonial literature in English, the present study aims at exploring perpetuate unequal economic and cultural relations with the struggle of the people concerned with race, religion, invasion and pacification in the form of the issues of identity and culture.

INTRODUCTION

African literature, literary works of the African continent. African literature consists of a body of work in different languages and various genres, ranging from oral literature to literature written in colonial languages.

Oral literature, including stories, dramas, riddles, histories, myths, songs, proverbs, and other expressions, is frequently employed to educate and entertain children. Oral histories, myths, and proverbs additionally serve to remind whole communities of their ancestors' heroic deeds, their past, and the precedents for their customs and traditions. Essential to oral literature is a concern for presentation and oratory. Folktale tellers use call-response techniques. Some of the first African writings to gain attention in the West were the poignant slave narratives, such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Olaudah Equiano* or *Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), which described vividly the horrors of slavery and the slave trade. As Africans became literate in their own languages, they often reacted against colonial repression in their writings. Others looked to their own past for subjects. Thomas Mofolo, for example, wrote *Chaka* (tr. 1931), about the famous Zulu military leader, in *Susuto*.

Several founded newspapers that served as vehicles for expressing nascent nationalist feelings. French-speaking Africans in France, led by Léopold Senghor, were active in the negritude movement from the 1930s, along with Leon Damas and Aime Cesaire, French speakers from French Guiana and Martinique. Their poetry not only denounced colonialism, it proudly asserted the validity of the cultures that the colonials had tried to crush.

All were writing in European languages, and often they shared the same themes: the clash between indigenous and colonial cultures, condemnation of European subjugation, pride in the African past, and hope for the continent's independent future.

In South Africa, the horrors of apartheid have, until the present, dominated the literature. Es'kia Mphahlele, Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Dennis Brutus, J. M. Coetzee, and Miriam Tlali all reflect in varying degrees in their writings the experience of living in a racially segregated society.

Much of contemporary African literature reveals disillusionment and dissent with current events. For example, V. Y. Mudimbe in *Before the Birth of the Moon* (1989) explores a doomed love affair played out within a society riddled by deceit and corruption. In Kenya Ngugi wa Thiong'o was jailed shortly after he produced a play, in Kikuyu, which was perceived as highly critical of the country's government. Apparently, what seemed most offensive about the drama was the use of songs to emphasize its messages.

The weaving of music into the Kenyan's play points out another characteristic of African literature. Many writers incorporate other arts into their work and often weave oral conventions into their writing. p'Bitek structured *Song of Iowino* (1966) as an Acholi poem; Achebe's characters pepper their speech with proverbs in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Others, such as Senegalese novelist Ousmane Sembene, have moved into films to take their message to people who cannot read.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Chinua Achebe, 'the father of modern African literature', talks to Ed Pilkington about inventing a new language, his years in exile from his beloved Nigeria - and why he changed his name from Albert.

Chinua Achebe was born on the 16 of November, 1930. Achebe's parents, Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, were converts to the Protestant Church Mission Society (CMS) in Nigeria. The elder Achebe stopped practicing the religion of his ancestors, but he respected its traditions. Achebe's unabbreviated name, Chinualumogu, was a prayer for divine protection and stability. His first novel was called "Things Fall Apart" (1958), and his last was "Anthills of Savannah"(1987). The Achebe family had five other surviving children, named in a similar fusion of traditional words relating to their new religion: Frank Okwuofu, John Chukwuemeka Ifeanyichukwu, Zinobia Uzoma, Augustine Ndubisi, and Grace Nwanneka.

SUMMARY

Things Fall Apart is a novel written by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. Published in 1959, its story chronicles pre-colonial life in the south-eastern part of Nigeria and the arrival of the Europeans during the late nineteenth century. It is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English, one of the first to receive global critical acclaim. It is a staple book in schools throughout Africa and is widely read and studied in English-speaking countries around the world. Achebe's debut novel, it was first published by William Heinemann Ltd in the UK; in 1962, it was also the first work published in Heinemann's African Writers Series. The title of the novel was borrowed from W. B. Yeats' 1919 poem "The Second Coming". The novel follows the life of Okonkwo, an Igbo ("Ibo" in the novel) man and local wrestling champion in the fictional Nigerian clan of Umuofia. The work is split into three parts, with the first describing his family, personal history, and the customs and society of the Igbo, and the second and third sections introducing the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community.

Things Fall Apart was followed by a sequel, No Longer at Ease (1960), originally written as the second part of a larger work along with Arrow of God (1964). Achebe states that his two later novels A Man of the People (1966) and Anthills of the Savannah (1987), while not featuring Okonkwo's descendants, are spiritual successors to the previous novels in chronicling African history.

CULTURAL IDENTITY LOSS OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is a story about personal beliefs, customs, and also a story about an identity confliction. There is struggle between family, culture, and religion of the Ibo tribes. It shows how things fall apart when these beliefs and customs are challenged and how a personal identity changes for a man. The novel concerns the life of Okonkwo, a leader and local wrestling champion throughout the villages of the Ibo ethnic group of Umuofia in Nigeria, Africa, his three wives, and his children. Throughout the novel, Okonkwo is internally challenged and slowly becomes someone that is no longer recognizable by his friends or his family. When Okonkwo faces change, his identity starts to fade. Okonkwo is one of the most powerful men in the Ibo tribe. In his tribe, he is both feared and honored. This is evident by this quote, "Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on the solid personal achievements. He brought honor to his tribe by throwing Amalinze the Cat". This suggests that in Okonkwo's tribe, making a name for yourself in any way possible, even if that means fighting and wrestling to get your fame attains power. Okonkwo wanted to be one of the highest leaders in the tribe, and was willing to do anything in order to achieve that goal. He loved his tribe, and they defined him. Our concern, therefore, is to show how male power, honour, and the sense of duty have led to the decline of Okonkwo's identity.

Set in Igboland towards the end of the nineteenth century, *Things Fall Apart* is characterised by an imbrications of many themes among which one can mention male power, honour, the sense of duty, exile, clash of cultures, order and hierarchy. The novel illustrates the chaos and the conflicting situation caused by the arrival of the Europeans who brought with them a new religion, a new way of life, and new ways of thinking. The first part of the novel shows the well structured society of Umuofia, with its 'political' organisation and kinship system. One also witnesses the first illustration of male power through the main character, Okonkwo who is depicted as courageous warrior whose fame is beyond doubt:

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. (TFA, p.3)

Okonkwo's fame is emphasised by the narrator who puts it parallel to a physical description that reveals much about his personality: That was many years ago, twenty years or

more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. *He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often.*

He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough; he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. (TFA, pp.3-4)

The Nigerian society Achebe describes in *Things Fall Apart* is characterised by patriarchy which manifests itself at all levels. Despite the concept of *Nneka*, meaning "Mother is Supreme," which is reminiscent of Steady's assertion that "the most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother", women are always marginalised and looked upon as mere properties of men:

"In domestic terms, women are quantified as part of men's acquisitions. As wives, women come in multiple numbers, sandwiched between yam barns and titles." Therefore, women appear in Umuofia society as part of the many criteria referred to for manliness. Their isolation is stated by the narrator: "It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men." (TFA, p.87).

But this is not inherent to Umuofia only. In fact, in African societies where phallocracy is dominant, women are usually placed in a secondary position. It is not then surprising if the author opposes him to his father who is depicted as a lazy and irresponsible drunkard:

Unoka, for that was his father's name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was a lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbors and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man's mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one's lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts. (TFA, p.4)

Unoka's lack of responsibility appears through his inability to manage properly the money he earns. His only concern is to get gourds of palm-wine and to celebrate with his friends. He is depicted as a failed man, as an *agbala*. The fact that people mock at him is also illustrative of that failure the narrator reinforces in the following lines:

Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he

was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. /.../ Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. (TFA, pp.5-6)

This negative picture drawn of Unoka is not fortuitous. It is a device used by the narrator to epitomise male power in the Igbo society as well as the conception people have of men who fail to achieve it. Thus, one realizes that men's power is closely connected with their own quest for identity. This explains the reason why Okonkwo is in a perpetual attempt to strengthen his power which sometimes is threatened in many regards. In other words, he tries to define himself by forging an image which, in his patriarchal society, is that of the real man with all the power attributed to him. His identitarian essence and social status constitute the main preoccupations Okonkwo grapples with in an internal conflict

Conclusion

It is clear to all that no culture would stand still and even if there had been no colonization, those ancient and traditional cultures would have certainly changed during time but it is noteworthy to mention that there is a big difference between this gradual and natural change of culture over time and that force change caused by colonization. The first action colonizers decided to do was to teach their language to native black people in order to impose their culture and values on the indigenous black people and consequently decrease the probability of Blacks' rebellion. Their plan was really successful and made colonized people or "colonized subject" to accept their inferiority in contrast to the Whites superiority. They wanted to be like white people and imitate them in their behaviour, speech, and lifestyle. From what presented in this article it can be derived that the process of colonization is not just a one-side operation but both the colonizer and the colonized people are effective in actualization of this process and what colonizer starts to do is accepted, continued, and fulfilled by the help of native people. We should notice that colonialism is not and cannot be limited to any specific nation and any particular time because it can happen to anyone in any time. Colonialism is not just a thing of the past, frozen in time, but nowadays there is a new kind of colonization which is done through different means with the same purpose of cultural, economic, and political subjugation of vulnerable nations.

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