

Nigerian Novel: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as World Literature

Ifediora Okiche^{1*} Amarachi Ibe²

1. General and Entrepreneurship Studies, Topfaith University, Mkpatak, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

2. Department of Education Foundations, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

*E-mail of the corresponding author: if.okiche@topfaith.edu.ng

Abstract

The paper examined Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* as an example of world literature and emphasizes how Nigerian (Igbo) perception of the world is illuminated in the text investigated. Although previous studies have been done on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the paper pays critical attention to gender, race, tradition, religion, ethnicity, nationality, culture clash, Igbo cosmology, and politics in colonial Eastern Nigeria. The tension between the British colonial actors and Okonkwo are equally examined. The essay adopts postcolonial theory as its theoretical framework. The paper concludes that issues examined in the text are not only regional but global. The paper recommends that further studies should be done on the works of Nigerian novelists that illuminate tenets of World Literature.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, postcolonialism, culture, world literature, Umuofia, conflict

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Introduction

The novel *Things Fall Apart* was first published in 1958 and has attained international status as world literature for many obvious reasons. The novel is written in English language and Achebe tries to include elements of the oral tradition of Igbo people. Set during pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria, the conflict between western culture and African culture are examined. In addition, Chinua Achebe's novel brought African literature to the lime light. Hugh Holman, in an earlier study defines the novel as "any extended fictional prose narrative...in which the representation of character occurs either in a static condition or in the process of development as result of events or action". (298) Achebe therefore wrote for his generation and can be classified as amongst the first generation of Nigerian novelists. The novel is an extended or long prose narrative that is fictional with numerous characters that embellishes it. Okwudiri Anasiudu opines that the "Nigerian novel espouses or share similar commonage with other African novels, and the novels of the Americans, Europeans, Asians, in terms of their diegetic flow or cause and effect, it diverges or differs in its capacity to construe the Nigerian experience, re-presented through the Nigerian socio-cultural context and artistic flavour either in English Language, code-mixed language or other linguistic forms of expression evident in Nigeria". (39) Achebe read the works of some European novelists and how they portrayed African in a very negative manner, these writers include Joyce Carrey and Joseph Conrad. The novels of the first generation of Nigerian writers wrote colonial novels or what could be referred to as national literature. Kwame Anthony Appiah notes that:

Achebe moves from the creation of a usual past in *Things Fall Apart* a cynical indictment of politics in the modern sphere ... like many of the second stage of which it is a part, represents a challenge to the novels of the first stage: it identifies the realist novel as part of the tactic of nationalist legitimation. (661)

The African novelist is charged with the responsibility of reveling events in his society, the society therefore becomes the bedrock through which events are illuminated for the world to see. Achebe's novel can be first identified as national or regional literature which is a product of the society. In the words of Achebe, he states that "The role of the writer in a society such as ours besieged with many pathologies –ethnic bigotry, political ineptitude, corruption, and the cult of mediocrity – is not an easy or rigid one. Nigeria writers can also choose to turn away from the reality of Nigeria's intimidating complexity or conquer its mystery by battling with it. I hope we all choose the latter". (10) Literacy especially the ability to write and communicate effectively using the English language have contributed to the spread of Nigerian literature written in English. The first generation of Nigerian novelists wrote their novels in English, it was possible as a result schools built by missionaries and British colonial authority in Nigeria. Arthur Sharto Gakwandi states that:

The African novel has attained maturity in a relatively short period of time because it did not go through a long evolutionary process. ...By the middle of the twentieth century, there existed in Africa certain social factors that had wide correspondence with those which gave birth to the novel in the eighteenth-century Europe. Increased literacy, the increased leisure that goes with urbanization, the growth of a commercial middle class and the dominance of science over magic and superstition are some of the major factors. (128)

The study applies postcolonial theory in the analysis of the text, postcolonialism is the reaction of countries that were once colonialized. Major proponents of the postcolonial theory include Franz Fanon, Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. Postcolonialism is not limited to only the literary works of formal colonies in Africa but also Asia, South Africa and the Caribbean. Paul Michael Lutzeler postulates that “postcolonialism continues that anticolonial discourse of earlier decades; ...deals with the examination of the relationships between the formerly or presently colonizing and colonized countries”.(n.p) Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is first identified as national literature as a result of the view that he writes firstly for his people. He captures the numerous experiences of his kinsmen during pre-colonial and colonial Nigeria objectively. In an earlier study by Asiner Martin, he avers that:

colonial writers had to *write to its former rulers* to expose the various and subtle means by which the rulers imposed their will on the ruled. This, of course, meant declaring a literary war, the sole purpose of which was to win support for the ex-colony’s economic prosperity, and given the leftist mindset that had grown prodigiously strong in the West following the Second World War, this was not a difficult task. (n.p)

Achebe tries to explore the ethnicity of the Igbo people during colonial Nigeria, he writes from the cultural context of his people. His immediate environment becomes instrumental to the bulk of the things examined in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe relies tremendously on the oral literature of his Igbo people. The novel *TFA* henceforth progress from a national or regional literature to becoming world literature. Many years ago, world literature could have meant the literary works written by Europeans read by their formal colonies but times have changed as they include the literary works written by formal colonies. *TFA* is translated to over thirty languages and read by millions of people from different parts of the world. World literature is dynamic, cuts across cultures, embraces new styles motifs, divergent, investigate various windows of the world and explore new areas in literary discourse. The translation of Achebe first novel into many languages may have also projected his novel as world literature. David Damrosch observes that:

The rich variability of world literature is already fully evident in Goethe’s conversations with Eckermann. Goethe had a lively sense of the ways his own books could benefit by translation (to various languages), even as he himself read voraciously in a surprisingly wide range of foreign literatures. (n.p)

Achebe has been described as the “father of modern African literature” as a result his immense contribution to scholarship and creative writing. More importantly is that *TFA* is a postcolonial text that takes a critically examination of events before and after the culture contact between Europeans and Nigerians (Igbo). Furthermore, Martin Asiner states that:

Literature in post-colonial sense was an inclusive term that demanded that colonial writers to do more than just write for their newly made independent citizens. Now, colonial writers had to write to its former rulers to expose the various and subtle means by which the rulers imposed their will on the ruled. (n.p)

The implication of Chinua Achebe’s postcolonial novel written in English is that the discourse in the text explores issues that appear to appeal to the universals. Using Achebe’s *TFA* we shall examine how the text expresses its perception of the world and the tensions between its culturally specific and universal aspects.

Igbo Cosmology and Tensions Relating to Culture Diversity in *TFA*

Culture elucidates the way a group of people or tribe do things which is symbolically reflected through their worldview. Before the culture contact between the natives of Umuofia in Achebe rural novel *TFA* and British colonial actors, Umuofia had its own culture, tradition and religion which are deeply rooted in the Igbo cosmology. It is important to note that tribes across the world have their own culture and religion which is a reflection of their perception of the world. D. A. Masolo in a previous study notes that “African religion is found in all aspects of Africans’ lives, in their activities.” (112) Achebe shows us in *TFA* that the Igbo people were religious even before the coming of English men to Nigeria and Umuofia in particular. In a previous study by Achebe, he notes that the Igbo people “belief in conversation even with God. ... They were not easy to colonize; the British would consider the Igbo habit of arguing as surprising is the real surprise”. (6) Chi in Igbo cosmology can be defined as a person’s personal god responsible for his/her success or failure in life. Unfortunately, the tragic hero Okonkwo in *TFA* epitomizes a man with a bad Chi. Although he is hard working, a wrestler and titled man but all his personal achievements comes to ruins as a result of his Chi. Achebe shows us in *TFA* that the Igbo people of presents day Eastern Nigeria are very religious people, when we are told that:

Near the barn was a small house, the ‘medicine house’ or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his person god (Chi) and of his ancestral spirit. He worshipped them with sacrifices with kola nuts, food and wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children. (12)

The statement above illustrates that the Igbo people are very religious group of people, they belief in

Chukwu the supreme God who they can communicate with through small gods. They venerated shrines the same way Catholics also venerate shrines for religious worship across Nigeria and other parts of the world. In *TFA*, Achebe also shows us that most tribal societies just like we find in Umuofia are communal, the inhabitants of Umuofia are meant to look after the interest of their kinsmen and protect the life and property of an Umuofian. When Okonkwo mistakenly killed a kinsman, he was banished from his ancestral land as a result of the sacrilege he committed. Achebe informs us that “It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land”. (99) Myth making is also common amongst the Igbo people which are exemplified in the Ogbanje myth in *TFA*. Various cultures of the world practice class system, the negative symbolic implication of this class system is that it place some men to be “more equal than other men” which is exemplified through the Osu cast system illustrated in text. Achebe informs us that they were amongst the first to embrace European culture and religion together with those he called *efulefu*. Postcolonial criticism also pays critical attention to gender, women in Achebe’s *TFA* are relegated in the background, and they are not heard as a result of the patriarchal society. Okonkwo’s wives appear to be “seen but not heard”. Race is another predominate issue in *TFA*, one tend to observe a situation a particular race (white) wants to dominate another race (black). British colonial actors in the novel discriminate, humiliate and intimidate the chiefs of Umuofia and Okonkwo in particular. Racism no doubt is a social construct by Europeans to exploit Nigeria’s human and natural resources. Religious conflict becomes a major issue in *TFA*, we see a situation where the British colonial actors which include but not limited to the missionaries, colonial officers such as Mr. Kiagga, messenger, white Commissioner, Mr. Brown and the District Commissioner are in conflict with some clansmen in *TFA*.

Umuofia had changed drastically since the return of Okonkwo, however he has refused to adapt to the change that is associated with the coming of the white man. Religion is a universal concept which cuts across various races in the world. Before the coming of the white man to Umuofia, they had their religion which united them. Achebe brings to our observation how the new religion (Christianity), have brought about change and has destabilized Umuofia when he state that:

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast (Osu) but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man as Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles, and who like a madman had cut an anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the Christians. The white man missionary was proud of him and he was one of the first men of Umuofia to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, or Holy Feast as it was called in Ibo. Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the Feast in terms of eating and drinking, only more holy than the village variety. He therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion. (139)

It is imperative to note that change is indeed inevitable in any society not excluding Umuofia, Okonkwo, the tragic hero in *TFA* tied to resist change but unfortunately for him, he was unable to do so. Since pre-colonial Igbo society was a communal one which believes in unity and collectivity in doing things in the clan, it becomes almost impossible for Okonkwo to resist the change in Umuofia. Okonkwo’s attempt to resist change alone amounts to futility after he killed a messenger and his clansmen did nothing to stop or kill the other messengers who escaped. The culture that informs Umuofia to be their brother’s keeper was indeed broken by their inaction. Achebe also informs us that:

In a flash Okonkwo drew his machet. The messenger crouched to avoid the blow. It was useless. Okonkwo’s machet descended twice and the man’s head lay beside his unformed body. The waiting backcloth jumped into the tumultuous life and the meeting was stopped. Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia will not go to war. He knew because they had let the man escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in the tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’ (163)

Okonkwo was unable to change Umuofia alone; he needed the collaboration of his clansmen to eradicating the white men out of Umuofia. The above action by Okonkwo’s clansmen foregrounds his imminent death; his effort to eradicating colonial elements in his clan becomes unattainable. Apart from Christian religion which was introduced in Umuofia that brought about a lot of tensions, the introduction of indirect taxation was also another problem associated with race. British colonial actors in Umuofia imposed heavy taxation on the people of Umuofia with the aim of exploiting their human and natural resources. Communalism is deeply rooted in the people of Umuofia which was illustrated in their swift response to the direct taxation by the colonial authority before the eventual release Okonkwo and some clansmen. The narrator puts it “Unless you pay the fine immediately, said their headman, ‘we will take your leaders to Umuru before the big white man, and hang them’”. (156) Things began to fall apart in Achebe’s *TFA* as a result of the intrusion of “lunatics” with their “lunatic religion” into Umuofia. Although, religion may be universal to man but the “mad logic” of the Trinity might have captivated many Umuofians apart from Nwoye, Okonkwo’s first son.

Death is an inevitable universal phenomenon that cuts across various cultures in the world. Both African and European postulate that there is an afterlife. Unfortunately, Okonkwo’s soul may not be able to come back to

life in form of reincarnation because he committed sacrilege by killing himself. Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo is of the view that “The belief in immortality of the soul is depicted in the belief in reincarnation, which is the idea of partial rebirth”. (59) Unfortunately Okonkwo may not be able to reincarnate because he was not given a befitting burial as a chief of Umuofia. Okonkwo therefore epitomizes a tragic hero, although he has a bad Chi but his temperaments also brought about his tragic death in *TFA*. The narrative is the story of a people that were united before the intrusion of missionaries and colonial agents in Umuofia that led to the destabilization of the clan and the tragic death of Okonkwo. *TFA* pays critical attention to the situation prevalent during the time Achebe wrote the novel. It is also important to mention that Jasper Ahaoma Onuekwusi mentioned in an earlier study that:

The novel has since arrived and has acquired a dynamism that enables it undergo further modifications as dictated by social, political, economic, aesthetic, cultural and religious situations of the ages and times in which it is written. It arrived as a literary form that will doggedly explore man in his totality, his assumptions, his conceptualization of time and space, his attitudes, taste and perceptions of reality, even as dictated by the times and ages in which he lives. (63)

In Igbo tradition, elderly people are respected because of their age and wealth of experience in life, they are also custodians of the tradition of the people in their communities. People gain from their fountain of knowledge and experience. Indeed it is unfortunate that the elders of Umuofia were humiliated by the white man who came to Umuofia. It is important to note at this juncture that the white man does not understand the culture of the people of Umuofia and also ridicule the people by not paying close attention to details. They come to Umuofia to destruct the communal peace and tranquility that exist within the inhabitants of Umuofia. Brothers are now up in arms against fellow brothers and the white man has succeeded in sowing seeds of division amongst clansmen. The major tension in the novel is the inability of the white man to understanding the culture, custom and the tongue of the natives they invade with their own religion and administration. Okonkwo in *TFA* is troubled, and asks:

‘Does the white man understand our custom about land?’ ‘How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us? 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, 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.’ (141)

A major universal aspect in *TFA* is that both the Europeans (Britons) and the people of Umuofia belief in God. While the people of Umuofia communicate to God through, deities, priest, minor gods, the white man is able to assess God through his son Jesus Christ without seeking the help of a minor god. The dialogue between the preacher Mr. Brown and Akunna is thought provoking. They learnt a lot about each other’s religion.

Okonkwo eventually kills himself when he discovers that the people of Umuofia did not want to engage in arm struggle to eradicating all forms colonial elements in Umuofia. That was when Okonkwo dead spiritually before he eventually hung himself on a tree. Igbo cosmology is revolved around birth, death and rebirth in the form of reincarnation. They cycle is not complete for Okonkwo because he was not given a befitting burial which will enable him join his ancestors in the spirit realm or world before he will be able to reincarnate.

Conclusion

Through Chinua Achebe’s *TFA*, the narrator portrays that his narrative is a reflection of series of events during colonial and postcolonial Eastern Nigeria and expresses the perception of the world from colonizer and colonized perspectives. The issues examined in the novel remains topical, culture contact between Umuofia and British colonial actors snowballed into various forms of culture/religions conflicts in the text. Okonkwo refusal to yield to change eventually led to his death. Okonkwo’s achievements are personal and he could do nothing further without the collective will of his clansmen. Achebe’s *TFA* have progressed from regional to world literature as a result of his use of English and the topicality of the issues in his rural novel.

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