

Challenging the Colonial Stereotypes or Conforming to Them: Investigating Achebe's Intent in *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* attempts to depict the pre-colonial Igbo life, culture and traditions along with the systematic description of a fully functioning administration, religion, justice system, social and family rituals of the Igbo society. Through providing a detailed account of the pre-colonial Igbo society, Achebe basically tries to counter-argue all the misrepresentations and distorted images of Africa portrayed in the western narratives. This paper outlines how and why the Igbo society and all its functional apparatus start disintegrating after the catastrophic entry of the Europeans to that society in the guise of missionaries, educators, administrators, judges and sometimes tradesmen. It highlights the areas through which Achebe tries to give an authentic portrayal of the Igbo society and also finds out the reasons why the native Igbo people fail to withstand the colonial force. This study finally affords to analyze how far and to what extent Achebe is successful in challenging these distortions and misrepresentations; and while challenging, how he knowingly or unknowingly accepts some of the stereotypes and surrenders to those to maintain the objectivity of the narrative.

Keywords: Things Fall Apart (TFA); Stereotypes; Igbo Society; Colonialism; Okonkwo

Introduction

In most of his writings, Chinua Achebe endeavors to present the black beauty of so called black Africa and through his presentation, he targets not only the colonial whites but also those black people who consider themselves inferior and desperately try to become whites or whites-like. In *The Novelist as Teacher*, Achebe clearly states his goal as to help his society 'regain belief in itself and put away the complexes

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of the years of denigration and self-abasement' (Achebe, 1965: 44). His writings also attempt to question all the misrepresentations and reductionist portrayal of Africa in the western discourses in which Africa is depicted as a dark continent without its own heritage, history, culture and civilization and also presented as mere mysterious, primitive, impenetrable, animalistic, and exotic others. Fakrul Alam echoes that view and states that "one of Chinua Achebe's goals in writing *Things Fall Apart* was to correct a whole history of misrepresentations of his people and country in occidental discourse" (Alam, 2012: 40). Western people always have a euro-centric view of the world, firmly believing their culture to be superior. Driven by that view, the Europeans invaded Africa with an apparent humanitarian aim to civilize the so called inferior, uncivilized African minds and most of the Africans accepted that labeling of their being uncivilized without much disagreement as a pre-ordained destiny. Frantz Fanon (1967) in his *Black Skin, White Masks* criticizes this type of mindset of those black people from the French-colonized islands in the Caribbean living in France who frantically try to speak French in order to make an entry into the French culture. But when they are in desperate effort to speak French ignoring their native language, they are constantly reminded that they can never be fully French.

Achebe's groundbreaking novel, *Things Fall Apart* specifically outlines how the British colonial power takes control of Igbo society of Nigeria in the names of providing good governance, stable administration, enlightening education, religious equity, and flourishing trade and commerce. He further illustrates how all these so called noble grounds prove otherwise in the end and cause irreparable disasters on the African psyche thus creating divides among the natives and inducing them to indulge in hatred, doubts and confusions against each other. *Things Fall Apart* also opposes the kind of occidental knowledge that attempts to portray the Africans as having nothing to take pride in and criticizes the mindset of those Africans who hold the same view about themselves. Besides that, it gives an authentic depiction of the rich and varied customs and traditions of Igbo society through an Igbo individual-Okonkwo who, like the society itself becomes a victim of the cross cultural encounter and the colonial invasion. This novel also celebrates Okonkwo's hatred and resistance against the British colonialism to maintain the natives' innate impulse of struggle against oppression, and at the same time, raises serious questions about his much obsession with "masculine" values sprouted from his 'fear of failure and of weakness' (Achebe, 1958: 13) eventually causing intolerance and instability in the society. Some other cross-currents that enrich the novel include the emergence of neo-colonialism (portrayed

through Kiaga and the *kotmas*), the sufferings of being in exile, the desperate urge of diasporic looking back into one's root, the psychological tensions of being a witness to everything of one's own society falling apart and, most importantly, the trauma of one's being misunderstood by one's own clan and family.

This novel is a significant response to and a graphic record of the painful aftermaths of the disturbing effects inflicted by the white colonizers on people, traditions, culture and establishments of Igbo society. In his narrative, Achebe does not seem to blame his Igbo people for colonialism on the one hand, nor does he overstate to glorify the traditional customs of the villagers on the other. But he presents the originality of Igbo society through traditional story-telling, description of traditional rituals and the frequent use of Igbo words and phrases so that both the whites and the native Igbo people who tend to deny or ignore the African culture can get the true picture of that society. Achebe always looks for such a narrative what Edward Said calls "an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness" pitted against "the unitary web of vision" (Said, 1979: 240; quoted by Gikandi, 1991: 31) which can indeed offer an alternative world containing the realities of the natives' true identity and solid representation that have been imprisoned in the abyss of colonial and pre-colonial struggle of power relations. This book is also part of Achebe's efforts not only to present the African experience through a different order of discourse, but also to transform and re-invent the African world. Achebe views the novel as an exercise in self-discovery of such a society that according to Homi Bhabha suffers the sentence of subjugation, domination, diaspora, and displacement (Bhabha, 1994: 171). *Things Fall Apart* is reflective and self-defining in nature since it strives to outline how the traditional values, native ways of life and local customs, modes and habits erode owing to their much exposure to the overwhelming European culture. It thus formulates a counter-hegemonic discourse which not only attempts to counter-argue all the long-standing western narratives about Africa but also tries to constitute a separate modern African identity what Iyay Kimoni terms as "the evolution of African culture towards a new form" (quoted by Ngate, 1988: 5). Though Achebe in this novel tries to frame a new cultural form of Africa, he constantly refers to the European culture with an aim to presenting these two cultures in 'both complementary and contesting ways' (Gikandi, 1991: 29).

This paper mainly addresses the areas where Achebe successfully challenges the colonial stereotypes and beliefs regarding Africa. It also attempts to unearth the extents where Achebe in the name of maintaining the objectivity of the narrative of the novel, intentionally or unintentionally surrenders himself to these reductionist stereotypes of Africa portrayed in western discourses. But Achebe takes recourse to the

colonizers' language (English) to counter-argue all the distortions thus sacrificing their own language and identity. Even after sacrificing their ancestors' religion, language, and culture, they come to make a shocking discovery of self-realization that they have not been the complete whites yet. Being disconnected from their roots, the natives feel disillusioned and badly try to return to their own culture and traditions only to assert their own legacy and history. And Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon and many others' writings echo the same urge and desperation. Ojaide can rightly be quoted here who views that "African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; ... their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty... they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity" (Ojaide, 2013: 150).

I

At countless other points in the novel, Achebe introduces some key tools the colonizers used to consolidate their rule in Africa and thus refers that "the white man had not only brought a religion but a government" (Achebe, 1958: 164). Whatever the British colonizers introduce to Igbo society in the name of disseminating the imagined process of civilization, ultimately leads to the disintegration and breakdown of that society. That is why it sounds comical when the whites say "we have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy" (Achebe, 1958: 184). But the Igbo community has a long performing self-government, solid administration and judicial system which are fairly democratic as well. Though the white people unfairly criticize these systems as merely based on oracles, Igbo administration treats everybody equally irrespective of being powerful or powerless which is virtually impossible in today's bourgeoisie state. And Achebe is very successful in showing that the pre-colonial Igbo society and its people had everything to rule themselves. He also gives a detailed description of the trial of Uzowulu versus his wife's family to show the community judicial system where both sides produce their cases before the ruling members of society, the 'egwugwu'. Needless to mention that it is a village public trial and the public irrespective of men and women, is allowed to watch the proceedings of the trial. When Okonkwo kills a person, the oracles (made up of 'egwugwu') act as judges and their verdict is very swift and prudent. Though Okonkwo possesses a great influence on Igbo society, he surrenders himself to the verdict and accepts a seven-year exile. Achebe painstakingly demonstrates not only the diversities of judgment declared by the Oracle (Okonkwo's exile) and by the general citizenry (rebukes about violating the Week of Peace and about women for not helping them in the recovery of a stray cow), but also shows the

procedures followed and the types of justice handed down by the formal court. Moreover, if conflicts arise, they have their own functional problem-solving ways. In Umuofia, good governance and conflict-resolution methods work in cahoots. The story of Ikemefuna reveals this feature of Igbo society and his presence in Okonkwo's household is seen as a gesture of peace. Through the story of Ikemefuna, Achebe basically refutes the racist falsities of the whites used to show that pre-colonial African societies are bunches of disordered tribes and civilization is purely and exclusively a western feature. *Things Fall Apart* is both a refutation of, and a counterblast to the colonial stereotype of pre-colonial Africa as a land without God or government. Besides this social judicial system, Igbo people have another parallel system within the family which is very functional and works alongside the social structure. Most of the daily affairs in Igbo society are governed by oracles and Igbo people mostly rely on nature. But in the whole novel, we never find any information why Igbo people take recourse to oracles instead of making use of their own intellect.

II

Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* also brings forth some other key issues- women and sexuality. In western society, women enjoy a dignified status and men-women relationship is based on mutual respect. Even the whites take pride in the great sovereign Queen Victoria, "the most powerful ruler in the world" (Achebe, 1958: 184) and use her name and fame to justify and legalize their illegal actions in Umuofia. But the status of women in Igbo society is absolutely different from the western world. Though the westerners categorically identify Igbo (African) women as oppressed and shackled, Achebe's depiction doesn't fully correspond to that oversimplified version of western portrayal. Nonetheless, he portrays Igbo society as extremely patriarchal where a man is recognized with the amount of aggression and prowess he can show and the number of titles he can earn. But women also live here with their own identity. In the family, mothers play a very key role. Mothers are seen showing their determination and care in rearing children. Even when the masculine Okonkwo finds shelter in his mother's clan during the period of exile, and accepts the maternal protection, it then becomes clear that women have something to say in Igbo society. When he is welcomed in his mother's village with a touching speech by his maternal uncle, we see the reference of Okonkwo's mother's contribution to his life. So the roles played by women like preparing foods, decorating walls and huts for special occasions and making the household run smoothly are really very significant. Igbo society is purely agricultural and because of that, everything revolves around the harvest. Undoubtedly, the man folk

largely dominate the production system of crops due to the patriarchal nature of that society though women also contribute a lot to the production of crops. In Igbo domestic life, women's authority is not at all absent since they play the role of teachers and educate their children through story-telling. Though fathers' responsibility is to concentrate on crop production system and other manly activities, mothers silently play the part of teaching their children and inculcate all the good qualities in them. So mothers' role in Igbo society can never be underestimated. Sometimes, they can hold the positions of leadership in the village and even can represent God. This representation of God- another important aspect of women in Igbo society is displayed through Chielo, who speaks on behalf of the God 'Agbala' and calls Ezinma as her "daughter (Achebe, 1958: 46)", which indicates that she might substitute Chielo's position as priestess.

Regarding marriage, a woman enjoys every right either to reject or accept a man's proposal. The way Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi "ran away from her husband and came to live with Okonkwo" (Achebe, 1958: 38) in order to fulfil her dream of getting Okonkwo as husband and manages her love for him to be socially recognized, is really worth mentioning. Women are not solely blamed for any extra marital physical relationship. When a husband accuses his wife of having sexual relationship with her ex-lover that causes miscarriage, the judges do not accuse that girl of that relationship; instead they ridicule the lover who irresponsibly "sleeps with a pregnant woman" (Achebe, 1958: 87). Achebe also hints at indiscriminate sexual activity which looms large in the courtship and marriage rituals of the society. The hymn at the end of the celebration, "when I hold her waist beads / she pretends not to know", (Achebe, 1958: 112) indicates the sexual interactions and expectations among women and men. Even Okonkwo's presence by the cave reminds Ekwefi of doting reminiscences of her first bridal night, when he "carried her into his bed and . . . began to feel around her waist for the loose end of her cloth" (Achebe, 1958: 103). Achebe's choice of words also carries sexual connotations. He shows the natives as naked with no clothes and shoes. That is why they are amazed at the ash-coloured shorts of the whites and term as 'Ashy-Buttocks' (Achebe, 1958: 165). When Ekwefi runs "holding her breasts with her hands to stop them flapping noisily against her body" (Achebe, 1958: 98) or when she hits her foot against an outcropped root, we can reach the conclusion that Ekwefi probably does not put on any clothes or shoes.

The broad classification of actions, responsibilities and even crops into masculine and feminine attributes largely speaks of men-women differences among Igbo people and respect and success in Umuofia are mostly determined by masculine attributes. There are certain activities that are specifically meant for men. Women should not carry the chair to

their kinsmen meeting since it is a man's activity. Okonkwo is very angry with the manly posture Ezinma takes and scolds her for not sitting like a woman since there are certain postures meant for women. Even crimes and crops are divided into male and female types. Okonkwo's accidental killing of Ezeudu's son is considered manslaughter and therefore a female crime. Coco-yams, beans, and cassava are considered women's crops while the yam is branded as the 'king of crops' (Achebe, 1958: 22) – a man's crop. But Igbo laws never entertain beating and harassment of women as men's monopoly. Igbo's rule of law never shows any bias to men or women, powerful or powerless. Achebe thus clarifies that Africa is not a land of lawlessness but at the same, projects the natives as naked and portrays them partly uncivilized thus accepting some of the western typical narratives about the Africans.

III

While reading *Things Fall Apart*, we notice that Achebe in order to unearth the great past of the Africans, never attempts to give the idealized or romanticized version of Igbo life; rather gives a detailed description of their beliefs, politics, and traditions some of which he thinks, consequently contribute to the disintegration of that society. In narrating the story, he is quite unemotional thus showing his narrative maturity and at the same time, maintains some inclinations towards the native culture through attributing some traits typically identifiable with the Igbo society with an aim to constructing the African identity and history and refuting western propaganda. That is why his narrative uses the art of traditional storytelling with frequent references to legends and sayings of the time to illustrate what Igbo people believe and respect. The narrative is built on a growing structure of inter-cultural and intra-cultural conflicts which towards the end of the novel, ends up in unfolding the complete falling apart of everything. The narrative of *Things Fall Apart* celebrates the culture of the natives, and at the same time portrays it as it is without trying to hide the flaws inherent in their culture. That is why some of the behavioural patterns of the natives like believing in superstitions (not whistling at night for fear of evil spirits or not calling a snake by its name) and bad omens (the twitching of eye-lid and the birth of twins) seem irrational to us. Achebe tries to introduce an African flavour to the narrative with a view to bringing about the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past in the African history. Putting these superstitions aside, the narrative also reveals the qualities of compassion, kindness, or accommodation along with great respect for blood relation. The narrative is full of humor and frequent use of figurative linguistic expressions through which Achebe highlights their traditions of celebrations including harvesting, feast, wrestling matches, moon-sighting events etc. These celebrations at different times of the year underline the togetherness and social nature of the pre-

colonial Igbo society. The main reason behind this society being more social is the abundance of land. Since land is the source of all prosperity in Igbo society, and it is available in abundance, the society does not erupt in chaos for land. Due to this abundance, they have the luxury to donate “a portion of the Evil Forest” (Achebe, 1958: 140) to the missionaries. It is such a society which really knows how to celebrate togetherness without bartering away its individuality though it never indulges in intemperate enjoyment of life. A society that views life from such a philosophical perspective, and has such a minute sense of enjoyment of life, can never be termed uncivilized and Achebe really questions the sense of civilization of those who label Igbo people uncivilized. At the same time, Achebe cannot evade criticism for making some native traditions public for which the whites can term the native culture uncivilized and obsolete.

IV

Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, not only gives a colourful description of the spontaneity of Igbo culture, but also shows how their education and language systems work and why these are prerequisites to know the life style and culture of Africa. Though Igbo people don't have any formal education system, they have the great knack of using their own language artistically. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is written in English with frequent references to a lot of native folktales and untranslated Igbo words and phrases as part of his plan to Africanize the English language in articulating an African story. Achebe's choice of the language is political since he wants to revitalize the native culture through English and capture, convey and disseminate the rhythms, structures and splendour of the Igbo language to the rest of the world in general and to his fellow Africans in particular. His leaving of some Igbo words without translation is partly to show that the Igbo language is not so easy for direct translation into English and mostly to establish that Igbo culture and values cannot be perceived within the matrix of the colonialist values. Achebe provides a comical illustration of the difficulties of translating the Igbo language when the missionary's translator, being an Igbo, speaks a dialect that pronounces the word 'myself' but comes out as 'my buttocks' (Achebe, 1958: 136) thus resulting in some humorous translations of the white man's message. Igbo people are very devoted to their language for which they even do not allow their children to receive the colonizer's language and education. To present the native culture animated and alive, Achebe seeks help of the Igbo language and shows how people react and ridicule at anything different from the native language.

Achebe's use of proverbs, another dominant linguistic feature of *Things Fall Apart* helps the readers understand the nature of Igbo life

first hand though sometimes, it seems that he overuses them. Ngugi wa Thiong'o in his *Decolonizing the Mind*, points out that in African English, many local words, phrases and idioms are used for the authentic presentation of African life in such a way that they become part of a different narrative style. The use of proverbs is also significantly perceived in the language of people living in togetherness in the villages rather than those living in isolation in the cities. So, we are not taken aback by Igbo people's use of proverbs since they live very close to nature in villages. And proverbs are deeply rooted in the Igbo language and culture and sharply reflect their lifestyle and thinking. The use of proverbs can also be seen as an art of conversation and people having this art are regarded very highly in Igbo society. In this regard, we can recall the role played by the story-tellers in that society where story-telling and listening to stories are quite common regular experiences. Moreover, since the Igbo language does not have any printed version and passes down from generations to generations orally, it enriches itself with a lot of phrases, proverbs and folktales thus connecting people more closely and strengthening social integrity. This is probably the reason for which Achebe never refers to any writers or poets in Igbo society. In Igbo society, language is an instrument for collective use and it should not be confined to serving the mere individual purpose. But Achebe's linguistic choice has given birth to a lot of debate. On the one hand, he keenly advocates for his native Igbo language, but prefers to write *Things Fall Apart* in English, the hegemonic language, on the other. From an African English writer's perspectives, using the English language creates many opportunities though it is very unfortunate for the local African languages since the local dialects/languages are not only deprived from the nurturing of good writers but also at the same time, become linguistically plundered and turn into an asset of the influential English Language. Though none can be solely blamed for this and it is part of the natural process of language adoption, it ultimately linguistically enriches the rich (English) and impoverishes the poor (Africans). And Achebe's use of language in *Things Fall Apart*, knowingly or unknowingly happens to serve that purpose.

V

“If a child washed his hands, he could eat with Kings” (Achebe, 1958: 8) – this proverb speaks volume of the simple social structure of Igbo society where people like to live in togetherness and harmony and where class discrimination prevails to a minimal extent. But with the sudden appearance of colonial administration and the start of trade with the west, possibilities of further conflicts open up in Igbo society. From the palm-oil and palm kernels business, only a selected few Umuofians who get benefited welcome the new trading opportunities. But these

trading activities significantly undermine the clan and its long tradition of self-sufficiency thus creating a new elite class and eventual divides among them. This outer interference not only divides the society but also families into two opposing parties- one favouring the change and the other disfavouring it. If Okonkwo vehemently opposes the change, his son Nowoye gives nod to that change more promptly. This division badly affects the social stability of the clan. But this trade does not introduce Igbo people with the western world for the first time. The reference to guns indicates that Igbo people use western technology even before the westerners come to Umuofia implying that Umuofia is not completely an isolated community. This new system instead creates two classes of people- the privileged one depending on trades and the unprivileged majority one depending on land. But Igbo society develops a collective and central management system of food production which bears some additional responsibilities in helping people grow crops in Igbo land. It has been clear that hard labour is the key to success in Igbo society and the society provides people with all the courage, inspiration and mental strength. Through showing the wide-acceptance of the newly introduced trading system by some of the natives, Achebe actually hints at the changes in economic activities and money making concepts and also at the shortcomings of the native production system which eventually echoes the western narrative about the broken Igbo economy.

VI

Besides trade, the white missionaries introduce a new religion. As a result, Igbo's cultural beliefs and their social and religious values get into direct conflict with those of the white men. The situation worsens when they ignore the native religion and build a church next to the village with a view to converting people to Christianity. They also enforce a new arrangement of days and weeks and introduce a new weekly calendar of seven days a week instead of the Igbo four-day week since they expect the new Christians in the community to "come [to church] every seventh day". (Achebe, 1958: 142) Moreover, these new Christians at the cost of weakening the clan bolster the church and cause greater tension among the non-Christians as well as between the Christians and the non-Christians. Uchegbue thus claims that with the advent of Christianity and western culture, many of the Igbo traditions are "either lost, given up, forgotten or being increasingly neglected while some are being reinterpreted, partially preserved, and absorbed in or interpolated with Christianity" (Uchegbue, 2010: 164).

Achebe in his *An Image of Africa* rightly mentions that "tragedy begins when things leave their accustomed place" (Achebe, 1978: 5) and the tragedy of Igbo people starts when their familiar culture and traditions leave their adapted place after the introduction of different

ideologies and philosophies about religion and human relations. So, Nwoye's prompt response to Christian missionaries is partly due to his very delicate and fragile situation caused from the deep concerns about certain native customs and mostly due to the new, more humane-appearing doctrine of Christianity. The missionaries' compassion for the new converts with low status in Mbanta and the 'gay and rollicking tunes' (Achebe, 1958: 138) of the rhythmic and evangelistic Christian hymns touch the "silent and dusty chords in the heart of an Ibo man" (Achebe, 1958: 138). He finds a solution and a sense of relief within as the chant of the church pours into 'his parched soul' (Achebe, 1958: 139). Moreover, he mostly gets troubled with what happens to Ikemefuna. The Ikemefuna incident finally drives him upset and later he loses faith in Igbo traditions, the driving force of that society. He has been in search of an alternative and when he gets that, he wholeheartedly surrenders to it. A careful insight into Nwoye's psychic tersely exposes that the new religion does seem to provide a reasonable solution to some vague and nagging questions existing in Igbo culture – the questions of abandonment of twins in the bush and the killing of Ikemefuna – that have been troubling his tender soul. He also silently revolts against the undercurrent social hierarchy system prevalent among the natives. Situated at the bottom of the hierarchy are the 'osu' people; people who are 'outcasts' (Achebe, 1958: 147) living in a special area of the village (Achebe, 1958: 148). Even in Igbo religion, Chukwu is at the top and called 'Master' and 'supreme' (Achebe, 1958: 170). After him comes his small gods, to whom the natives offer prayers and sacrifices. This is where Achebe describes the flaws of the social and religious systems of the Igbos and partly holds them responsible for the falling apart of the society but does not seem to properly defend them. This is why he simultaneously describes two incidents- Okonkwo's revolt and Nwoye's leaving his own religion and tends to generalize the reasons why some (e.g. Nwoye) are in favor of the colonial power and why some (e.g. Okonkwo) are dead against them. Questions arise whether there is any demand for change in the social structure of the society or that change is really inevitable. When changes come from within and when people are tired of the old traditions, they desperately look for an alternative and in that case, changes are inevitable. But in Umofia, nothing like this happens. Even we don't see much of internal conflicts in this stable and static Igbo society. In western anthropology, the non-western societies are described as immobile and dead. Achebe by describing Umofia as static and motionless, intentionally or unintentionally accepts those stereotypical descriptions. We can of course, blame a society only when its being static causes chaos and anarchy, and refuses to welcome any such changes which can bring about development to common people. For

Igbo people, nobody even Achebe does not fully stand in favor of the stance taken by the common Igbo men who actually do not want that forced change. Through describing Igbo society static and lifeless, Achebe indirectly welcomes that change that the colonial rule wants to bring about in Africa. In the later part of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe voices out for the oppressed natives, and identifies the colonial power as the oppressor. But in three fourths of the novel, he describes Igbo society as motionless and only in the last part he refers to the spontaneity and liveliness of Igbo people to negate the colonial propaganda. By this time readers have envisaged a static image of Igbo society and its people that largely corresponds to the image the colonizers usually portray for legalizing their invasion to Africa. And Achebe cannot shred off his negligence for creating this confusion among the readers.

The colonizers use almost similar tools and techniques across different continents to establish their authority. The missionaries are actually the auxiliary forces of the colonizers. It is our failure to look at the colonization process as a whole. Considering this, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a great work where he describes how the colonization process manifests itself through different forms. He very meticulously refers to the roles played by the missionaries in Umiofia. He also shows how they enter quietly with religion and win many of his own Igbo brothers and for them how his "clan can no longer act like one" (Achebe, 1958: 166). Because of their interference, chaos and conflicts erupt that eventually lead to the killing one of the missionaries. The reference to that killing incident does not bear much importance with respect to the overall theme of the novel. But this reference undoubtedly serves two purposes in the novel: 1) that killing incident occurs because Igbo people hold a different view and understanding about life and world and Achebe hints at the limitations of their viewpoints and 2) Achebe also plays the part of a non-conformist to the western propaganda and he protests the much narrated western portrayal of the Africans as cannibals and presents a parallel yet completely different image of African people. At the beginning, they get shelter in the unused evil forest of Igbo society, but later they conquer many uncared and unwanted men of that society. Achebe's depiction of the 'evil forest' represents, to a larger extent, the darker side of African culture that in fact opens the door for the West to enter the African world. He thus does not fully blame the colonizers for their permanent settlement in Igbo society; rather unearths some of the loopholes of the society itself and indirectly accuse those cracks for which conflicts also start residing there permanently.

VII

The strong point of *Things Fall Apart* is that Achebe views the colonization process as a whole instead of looking at it partially. He mostly remains unemotional and never tries to depict the conflict as a conflict between the colonizer and the colonized or between the good and the evil. While identifying the reasons of Nwoye's conversion to Christianity, Achebe mentions his bitter personal experience on the one hand, and the role of the priest's melodious tone at the time delivering speech on the other. While describing the missionaries, Achebe is very casual and never idolizes them. He simultaneously portrays the ill-tempered and intolerant whites and men with good behaviour and great compassion. Likewise, Achebe never romanticizes the image of Igbo people. He never compartmentalizes all the good with the native Igbo people and all the bad with the white missionaries. One interesting point in *Things Fall Apart* is that the ill-tempered priest who always shows hatred and spreads antipathy towards Igbo religion and enjoys antagonism between the two belief systems, ultimately works for the interest of the colonizers and the one who is very compassionate towards Igbo people, and wants to learn that local language, and mix with the locals, also works in favour of the colonizers.

The novel ends with the news of the white Commissioner writing a book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* where Okonkwo's story in other words, the story of Umuofia might at best contain a paragraph. His plan to treat Okonkwo's story briefly shows the limitations of the colonialist perspective which tends to simplify and generalize the African culture. It also reveals a cruel reality of the colonization process of how the colonial experiences help the white people open up their minds in order to exercise intellectual faculties. Like many other colonizers, it is the limitations of the Commissioner who views the Igbo natives from a European technological perspective and still treats them as primitive since he envisions himself to be a "student of primitive customs" (Achebe, 1958: 196). That Commissioner also embodies the historical inability of many other western scholars who fail to liberate themselves from their jaundiced views about Africa. But the irony is that the methods the colonialists adopt to pacify the so called primitives are through suppression and violence – themselves essentially primitive means for achieving their nationalistic objectives.

Because of these attitudes towards the Africans, many African writers later start writing as a protest which ultimately enriches the African literature. And the success of *Things Fall Apart* lies in Achebe's detailed presentation of religion, administration, judicial system, economy, language system and education of Igbo society and how these

institutions are targeted by the whites to establish their authority. *Things Fall Apart* thus combines both the views – the colonizers’ justification of their invasion and descriptions of the resultant reactions and apparent irrational behaviors of the colonized. Achebe shows the triumphant colonial power on the one hand and underlines the decay and fall of once rock solid Umuofia on the other. When Okonkwo returns home after seven-year exile, he does not find that resilience and integrity in the society and notice that the Umuofians are becoming more and more ‘soft like women’ (Achebe, 1958: 173). By this time many people have “joined the ranks of the stranger” (Achebe, 1958: 165) and have converted to Christianity to avail the facilities of education, healthcare and jobs provided by the whites. Okonkwo is helpless and speechless of how a society can change so rapidly. He wonders how the society which once had the courage to think about the white men as lepers can become so fragile. Achebe does not answer all these questions so explicitly but hints at some reasons for everything falling apart and their non-resistance. *Things Fall Apart* celebrates the oneness of The Igbo society and shows how Igbo people remain united in their thoughts, words and actions until the arrival of the colonizers as Obierika says that the white man “has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe, 1958: 166). Achebe probably does not agree with that opinion since he thinks that they are the only influential foreigners who simply redirect the opposing forces already looming large in the society. Obierika’s statements greatly validate the presence of such internal forces when he says that ‘our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government... How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us’ (Achebe, 1958: 165–166)?

There has always been a misreading that the appearance of the white men constitutes the ‘knife’ on the native traditions and the clan is always ‘held together’ by its cultural homogeneity and unconditional unanimity on any decision without much disagreement until the catastrophic entry of the whites. But it is not the white men alone rather it is the corporation between some of the Igbo men and the white men which ultimately constitutes the ‘knife’. The Igbo society always being ‘held together’ with undivided opinions also seems to be a mere myth since we see a repressed disagreement in the abandonment of the twins and in the tradition of banishment for accidental killings. There have also been some initial disagreements over giving ‘a piece of land to build their [missionaries] shrine’ (Achebe, 1958: 140). We notice other disagreements when some Igbo people raise questions regarding the egwugwu. Enoch even goes to the extent of unmasking the egwugwu just to reveal the non-divine nature of it and to show that it is just a man beneath a mask. And the inexperienced Nwoye’s as well as the eminent

Ogbuefi Ugonna's eventual alliance with the white people ultimately exposes that the society is not always held together; rather it contains some internal cracks. So, the colonial force manifested through forms of religion, administration and trade is therefore, merely the external stimulus to these internal cracks already existed in the society. Okonkwo's much obsession with mere physical display of manliness which sometimes ends up in committing a series of crimes by violating the rules and conducts laid down by society also widens those cracks. This stubborn adherence to manliness ultimately frightens some people (i.e. his wives) and alienates many others (i.e. Nwoye) thus loosening the familial and social bond.

While giving an account of the internal cracks of the society, Achebe also depicts how the whites develop different institutions in order to ideologically and emotionally disintegrate the natives. Mr. Brown builds a school and a much-needed small hospital in Umuofia which produce immediate and impressive results. Thus the ideological and repressive state apparatus go hand in hand to complete the total disintegration. Most importantly, things do not fall apart in the totally anarchic sense; rather they merely fall into a different pattern, a new pattern with which, unfortunately, some who are too orthodox and unyielding to change (represented by Okonkwo), cannot reconcile, and therefore become victims. This ultimately leads to the essential conflict between the inflexible forces of tradition (epitomized through Okonkwo) and the robust hostile forces of change (represented through the white colonizers and their native accomplices). So it is clear that the arrival of the white is not what solely pollutes and disintegrates the cultural purity of Africa; rather they merely accumulate the already prevailing forces in the society and redirect them in order to expedite the continuing process of an unavoidable change. Moreover the use of superior ideas and technologies in production system, administration, and even in religion and the innate and universal expectations of human beings for a better lifestyle and enjoyment also contribute a lot to the falling apart of that society. The Igbo people now start realizing that they must either acclimatize with the new trend and accept the colonizers or run the risk of becoming completely annihilated like the Abame people.

Is Okonkwo's Tragic Suicide Insignificant?

Okonkwo is a symbol of resistance and traditional order and his death thus apparently denotes the death of Umuofia. His death is the culmination of a self-destructive pride and an inevitable outcome of the crushing effects of the new order thus resulting in the unending struggles between the two civilizations and cultures. But to some extent, it is also insignificant. If we consider his fight (mostly for his personal

name and fame) against all his repeated ill-fortunes and read this novel as Okonkwo's personal life story, he can very much be compared with the Greek tragic heroes. But if we read the novel from its thematic perspective – familial and social integrity, his death becomes merely an individual issue since all his concerns and anxieties are mostly driven and motivated by his personal ego. When Okonkwo returns from his exile and intends to respond aggressively, he is not driven by his love for the native culture but for his personal ego. He views it as an opportunity to once more show his courage and to recapture his former glory. His promptness to burst into violence at slight incitements is also responsible for his downfall. Most of the time, Okonkwo not only outwardly disregards his clan members and their traditions, but also disrespects his inner feelings of love and protectiveness. This deep chasm in Okonkwo's divided 'self' accounts for the beginning of his decline. His endeavor to reinforce his personal ego ultimately leads him to the killing of a white man and his committing suicide. His suicide is the ultimate aftermath of his inner sufferings sprouted from his fear of failure. His death would have been representational if many more people from the Igbo society would fight and embrace death with him. He dies a lonely death and his mode of protest is so self-centered that even after death, he is deprived of the right of receiving funeral from his own society. This clearly indicates that his death does not represent the collective demise of the Igbo society and therefore, does not reflect anything other than a tragic incident of an individual. So, by not glorifying his death, Achebe probably disregards that popular view which holds that Okonkwo's death represents the death of Umuofia. Here Achebe's role seems to be dubious who shows Okonkwo's death as merely individual and at the same time justifies his tragic end while defending the struggle of Igbo society against the entire setback and disintegration, the colonial regime has brought about in that society. Even if we consider the colonizers as superior and developed, they cannot invade other countries. Invasion always comes with a bunch of oppressing apparatus. Their being the emissaries of light and civilization does not mean that they are all very civilized. Towards the last part of the novel, we see how Igbo people have to carry the scars of oppression, suppression and subjugation for long. So, we can, in no way, consider the occupying force as enlightening; rather we can shockingly discover how a stable organized society starts falling apart due to their oppression and suppression. The death of Okonkwo – the insignificant death of such a significant figure actually embodies the immeasurable damage inflicted on Igbo society by the imperial power. But Achebe does not seem to raise all these legal issues.

Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays the negative as well as positive features of Igbo culture, and he sometimes equally criticizes the natives as well as the colonizers. Unlike many other western writers like Joseph Conrad, George Orwell, and Herman Melville who tend to romanticize the African culture as primitive and animalistic, yet uncorrupted and innocent, Achebe never portrays Igbo culture as faultless and idyllic. But while criticizing the natives, he sometimes surrenders himself to the western stereotypes though he tries to maintain a wholly African standpoint. He shows that Igbo people have functioning judicial, religious, social and cultural principles even before the arrival of the whites to Umuofia and the entry of the Europeans with a new religion, administration, trade, and justice system merely serves to initiate chaos and conflicts among the natives. He illustrates how the once united Igbo society starts falling apart with the onslaught of British imperialism. Achebe successfully captures these concerns of countless African readers through the struggle of Okonkwo to maintain the integrity of his people against the overwhelming power of colonial rule. Achebe views the spread of Christianity and the death of Igbo culture as happening simultaneously in Umuofia though he also frequently mentions some internal weaknesses of Igbo society itself. *Things Fall Apart* also reveals how the missionaries employ 'divide and conquer' policy as part of their comprehensive strategy of colonization, in which the church functions as the basis for political and economic imperialism. But why Igbo people fail to withstand the colonization process is because of some internal flaws in the native structure and the divided nature of the society. And this imperialism leaves behind permanent psychological, political, cultural and ethnic damage which lasts long even after independence has been achieved and Okonkwo embodies that damage. Achebe celebrates the unity, oneness, their myths, legends, beliefs, customs, religions, proverbs, taboos, rites, and fables of Igbo society and shows how all these aspects that make the clan stable, are losing their values gradually because of the colonial invasion and the internal flaws of the natives. But Achebe's role in making modern African literature a part of world literature cannot be understated.

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