

Clash of Cultures: A Study of Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural diversification remains at the core of Chinua Achebe's masterpiece *Things Fall Apart*. Conflict between the Igbo and the Christian cultures has been the major theme of this novel. This collision of cultures occurs at the individual and social level. At the social level the Igbo's lack of a unifying self image and centralized leadership as well as their weakness in the treatment in core of their own people largely lie in this collision.

Thing Fall Apart narrates the tale of a traditional tribal hero, Okonkwo, who clashes with British imperialists in a changing Africa. As a leader of the Igbo community of ...He opposes to the new ways of Christianity. He feels that these changes are destroying Igbo culture – changes that require compromise and accommodation. These are complexities and perplexities around the difficulty of a conceiving how a colonized country can reclaim or reconstitute its identity in a language that is now but was not its own language, and genres which are now but were not the genres of the colonized.

Key words: Coloniser, colonised, culture, religion, Igbo, Chritianity.

'Post-Colonialism' covers the second half of the 20th century. It was, basically, the aftermath of the heyday of imperialism. Therefore the term "post-colonial" is used to signify a position against imperialism and Eurocentrism. Western ways of providing education and dissemination in the past and present become the major centres of study for those seeking alternative means of expression. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized happens to be the common denomination of post-colonial literature. It is marked by a great variety of its details like East-West encounter, sympathy and antipathy, acculturation and reculturation, rejection of British mode of language and impregnation of it by the native vitality. The foregoing discussion will prove Chinua Achebe an embodiment of this very expression - through diverse range of cultures and traditions. He has, abundantly but confidently, predicted the resultant conflicts, confrontations, and confusion between the world's two opposite but strong cultures.

The post-colonial literature focuses on the way in which literature by the colonising culture distorts the experiences and realities and inscribes the inferiority, of the colonised people. It also concentrates on literature by colonised people which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past's inevitable otherness. This otherness includes doubleness, both identity and difference and includes the values and meaning of the colonising culture even as it rejects its power to define.

Things Fall Apart is a complex novel, in which Chinua Achebe has foregrounded the religious conflict against the background of colonial encounter between African and British culture, acting as a historical force. Okonkwo, who is the hero of the novel by tribal standard, is an embodiment of native African culture and values. By the time, Okonkwo's exile comes to an end, he learns about many changes taking place in African life due to colonial forces. The white men have entered the country. The Africans initially resent their presence. The Christian missionaries start converting the Africans who are not very strong in their cultural moorings. The colonial encounter between the white and the black involves religious conflict. The defenders of Christianity intrude into Igbo religion proclaiming that they "have been sent by this great God to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that may be saved when you die. (TFA: 132)

Chinua Achebe holds the view that the colonial situation in Africa has brought not only a new religion, but also a new government both trying to attract and control the natives. Okonkwo is surprised to see the effect of colonialism on his fatherland – Umuofia, "But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in

ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial.” (158) In this novel, one of the native converts kills the sacred python which arises a serious conflict between the Western missionaries and the natives. Due to their different Western worldview they are not able to fathom the depth of religious sanctity of the Igbo culture. The custom adopted by the Nigerian tribe such a killing of twin as the banishment of the trespassers lead to serious conflict between these two cultures.

The spread of Christian religion, government and law is strongly resented by Okonkwo. In spite of native resistance to the white man’s religion, Christianity continues to attract the weak-minded people. It deeply perturbs Okonkwo: “Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart and he mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women.” (165)

Chinua Achebe wants to establish the fact that whenever two cultures come in contact with each other, the dominant culture influences the other culture in a number of ways. The minor culture is likely to undergo a process of acculturation by being attracted to the dominant culture. At such a juncture some people of the native culture become acutely conscious of their identity and try to resist the foreign culture.

Things Fall Apart underlines the idea that there is no alignment between the African tribal culture and the Western civilization. The British Commissioner who believes in the white man’s civilizing mission learns many a lesson from his administrative experience in Africa – their superstitions, beliefs, strange customs, mythological thinking etc. All these African traits do not agree with the rational modes of Western life. The Western man is compelled by the contingencies of his stay in Africa to educate himself rather slowly and educate other whitemen in course of time.

In his essay *Literature and Society*, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o explores the action and strategy of imperialism. Thiong’o holds the view that the aim of any colonial mission is to get at a people’s land and what that land produces. To ensure economic and political control the colonising power tries to control the cultural environment. The Western World has tried to influence the Africans by their ultimate outlook through their own literature, expression and images. But Chinua Achebe has showed them failed utterly in this respect.

Thus, there are complexities and perplexities around the difficulty of conceiving how a colonised country can reclaim or reconstitute its identity in a language that is now but was not its own language, and genres which are now but were not the genres of the colonised.

Chinua Achebe lays stress on coloniser vis-a-vis colonised formulation of hybridity, synchronization, and pastiche while ignoring the critical realism of writers more interested in the specifics of social and racial oppression. Thus, the colonised are utterly different from the colonisers, and, therefore, should not be totalised or essentialised through such concepts as a black consciousness, Indian soul, aboriginal culture and so forth.

Like a true colonizer, Chinua Achebe has presented a model of reality of African life, which is seemingly absolute and flawless as a replacement for what comes to be considered the old, savagely imperfect modes of thought ascribed to by the natives. During re-education, natives are inundated with negative images of themselves and their culture, as well as idyllic. For Chinua Achebe to understand the significance of native reeducation, one must look closely at the mentality of the educator. In *Things Fall Apart*, the repressive strategy of the British has been mocked at. A.S. Khayyoom remarks in this connection, "Achebe highlights in the novel the weaknesses and the disruptive forces within the organic and coherent society.... which are more responsible for the disintegration of the traditional society than the mere presence of the white man's culture." (56)

Chinua Achebe has criticised Conrad's dated characterisations of the indigenous people as primitive savages. She reflects, "We lived at the crossroads of cultures. We still do today... I am not talking all that rubbish we hear of the spiritual void and mental stresses that Africans are supposed to have.... We know the racist mystique behind a lot of that stuff and should merely point out that those who prefer to see Africa in those lurid terms have not themselves demonstrated any clear superiority in sanity or more competence in coping with life." (NV: 143) Yet this vision, for him, is hugely a way of looking at things, for though the crossroads does have a certain dangerous potency; dangerous because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirit. For Achebe the confluence of cultures creates a transcendent, new culture, somehow advanced beyond the sum of its parts, a prophecy.

Colonialism, inevitably, deals and treats with suppression. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, this oppression takes the form of a mostly unconscious cultural assimilation – an unknowing indoctrination of the colonialists; beliefs upon their colonised people. In this sense, the term 'post-colonial' can be cited as a continuing process of resistance and reconstruction. In the novel, the colonised people distance themselves from the Western ways and try to ignore its presence, continuing with their own lives in an uninterrupted manner.

As non-Western literature is read by Western readers, their interpretations might easily differ from those of the author. This trait is composed of the colonising culture and the retained aspects of native culture. The challenge that this hybridity presents is the importance of reading the literature as fiction, constituting a canon of non-western literature.

The phenomenon of re-establishing a culture by means of literature considers negotiating cultural hybridity while establishing selfhood. Native people must maintain those aspects of a colonised culture vital to their existence while manipulating them to serve as the building blocks of an independent society. They must also choose aspects, to relinquish which is a way of preventing cultural hegemony.

Thus, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is the story of Okonkwo's resistance to the colonial power of the British whereas he has taken his exilic punishment by the clan in his stride; he cannot tolerate the disintegrating presence of the British in his land. Chinua Achebe has delineated the colonised conflict between the two cultures very convincingly and beautifully from an insider's perspective.

References

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