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## **Cultural Transition in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana***

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### **Abstract:**

African literature has a great association with its soil and society. The imposition of colonialism has changed Africa socially, politically and economically. The major factors that are responsible for cultural transition are Westernization, urbanization, new educational system, newly introduced system of governance and the socio-economic and political institutions introduced during colonization. Cyprian Ekwensi is one of the most versatile writers of Africa. He has to his credit nine novels, six novellas, two collections of folk tales and number of short stories. Through his literary works, Ekwensi ventures to expose the various evils of colonization that led to corruption, prostitution, loss of cultural identity, etc. His novel *Jagua Nana* (1961) deals with cultural transition that results from urbanization as well as colonial situations. The present research paper is a humble attempt to analyze the select novel of Cyprian Ekwensi from the perspective of cultural transition in Africa in terms of education, marriage, politics, behavior and language.

**Keywords: transition, culture, colonialism, modernism, education, behaviour.**

The present paper is an attempt to focus attention on cultural transition in Cyprian Ekwensi's novel *Jagua Nana*. The novel presents a subtle critique of cultural transition in Africa due to the advent of colonialism and urbanization. Ekwensi has aptly portrayed social, cultural, political, religious, and economic changes in the post independent Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. In an interview with Lewis N. Kosi, Cyprian Ekwensi confesses how hard he has tried to represent the reality in his works: "I think I am a writer who regards himself as a writer for the

masses. I don't think of myself as a literary stylist: if my style comes, that is just incidental, but I am more interested in getting at the heart of the truth which the man in the street can recognize than in just spinning words" (Kosi 79).

The onslaughts of both colonialism and urbanization are severe. These onslaughts also have a great and long lasting impact on the psyche of the colonized. Colonialism greatly disturbs urban life. Due to rapid growth of industrialization, private life gets polluted. G. Gulam Tariq, in his book *Contemporary African Novel*, expresses Ekwensi's concern about the impact of alien culture on the native society in the opening lines of *People of the City*. "How the city attracts all types and how the unwary must suffer from ignorance of its ways" (Tariq 35). Traditional African people were generally simple, rural, and tradition bound. Every individual tried to promote his culture consciously or unconsciously and had a unique identity in the village. To the individual, it used to become mandatory to follow social order and cultural heritage. G. Gulam Tariq, in his book *Contemporary African Novel*, states that "the Igbo society does not concede an individual too much freedom for individual expression and personal gratification" (13). Compared to people in cities, traditional African people may appear backward and illiterate but are mostly satisfied with their mode of leading life. They strongly believe in moral values. Therefore, adultery, corruption, stealing, doing harm to innocent people, disobeying the elders in the community, etc. are the issues that are strongly condemned in such a society. Traditional African people have strong faith in the existence of god and they worship plants, caves, animals, rivers, and sea as an embodiment of god's presence in the universe. Beliefs, customs, rituals and ceremonies shape their individuality. They have a great faith in supernatural elements such as spirits, witches, gods and demi-gods. Therefore, they always try their best to satisfy these supernatural elements. The present paper is an attempt to highlight cultural transition in terms of education, marriage, behavior, language and politics.

The novel *Jagua Nana* focuses Ekwensi's concern about the effects of foreign culture on the traditional African society. Prior to colonialism, traditional African people used to remain satisfied with their mode of leading life. The majority of these people were also ignorant of the importance of education in life. However, they now realize the importance of education in their lives and they aim at pursuing their education by hook or crook. Women of the traditional African society are given free access to follow their dreams through the means of education.

Both men and women consider education as their privilege in life. Education develops rational thinking among them and they now no longer believe in the supernatural elements such as witchcrafts, black magic, etc. Education is one of the greatest gifts of the colonizers to the colonized. It greatly helps to enlighten traditional African society. Ekwensi presents Freddie as the representative of traditional African society and he {Freddie} prefers to visit foreign land to complete his higher studies. A few African people like Freddie go to the extreme end to achieve their aim in life. In the novel *Jagua Nana*, Freddie knows it well that Jagua is a prostitute and it is immoral to have any sort of relationship with her. In spite of all, he keeps relationship with her because he wants to succeed in his professional life. He regards her as the only source for economic support. Similarly, Nancy also pays visit to London to pass her typing test. Ekwensi presents Nancy as the representative of traditional African women. Women of traditional African society want to be self-reliant through the means of education. All this clearly shows that these characters, which were once the part of traditional African society, are now quite ambitious to succeed in life through the means of education. This educational awareness helps them to reshape their individuality in a great deal.

In *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi points out how education brings about enlightenment in the traditional African society. The traditional African people now no longer seem to believe in superstitions. When Nancy suggests Freddie that Jagua is invoking black magic to torture him, Freddie rejects the very idea of the presence of witches:

Only that morning he had been telling the pupils at the college that there was no such thing as black magic or witchery, only the imagination. Scientific facts ....could be demonstrated (45).

All this clearly shows that education compels traditional African people to think rationally. Their disbelief in supernatural element is the result of their educated minds. Education is one of the greatest gifts of the colonizers to the colonized. It causes significant changes in the traditional African society.

In the novel *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi depicts Jagua as an illiterate woman. Though Jagua is illiterate woman, she realizes the importance of education in elevating the standards of living. She desires Freddie to be her husband because he is a teacher in Nigerian National College. Freddie is another major character that helps to develop the plot of the novel. Jagua pays his tuition fees as well as purchases books for him. Being ambitious and studious by nature, Freddie

dreams to travel overseas to pursue his higher studies. Ekwensi focuses how the conservatives in Nigeria motivate their children to go to European countries to pursue higher studies. Once Freddie's trip to England for higher studies is confirmed, his friends arrange farewell parties for him. They remarked on Freddie:

He was, they said, a good example to Africa in thus seeking the Golden Fleece of Knowledge and leadership. Nigeria's future salvation depended on such trained people, they claimed (27).

Ekwensi also focuses how colonialism has greatly changed traditional system of education in Africa and how the traditional African people appreciate this new change in educational system. This changing scenario of educational system is depicted in the novel, when Jagua visits her home town Ogabu.

She now discovered that the wide area which had been cleared beyond the church was being planned for building a college. She learnt that Government had not yet approved the funds necessary for the project, but the people of Ogabu had started off, optimistically, on their own (71).

Through the characters of Jagua Nana, Nancy and Freddie (all these characters are the part of traditional African society), Cyprian Ekwensi focuses how education has played a crucial role in shaping the mentality of traditional African people.

Similarly, Ekwensi in his novel *Jagua Nana* depicts crisis in married life. Jagua Nana is the protagonist of the novel. She is an African woman. Ekwensi portrays Jagua as an old, bold, moving, caring, dashing, entertaining and controversial character in the novel *Jagua Nana*. Jagua is, in fact, a married woman. She is married to the city coal man at Enugu. Her married life is nothing but failure. Her husband is a materialistic man who fails to understand her expectations. His very ideas of leading life bring misery in her life. His main interest in life is his petrol filling station and garage. Everyday, he wakes up early in the morning and goes to supervise the selling of his petrol and to make entries in his book. Whenever Jagua goes there to see him, she, most of the time, finds him sleeping on the bare office table. He, later, becomes a successful businessman and has his own chain of petrol filling stations in the city. He also succeeds in purchasing a small car for him. Though he is on the verge of getting success in business life, he fails to keep the same momentum in married life. Jagua, actually, desires to be good wife. But it is her husband who makes her life unworthy of living. He is materialistic man

and never takes her to parties assuming that money will be spent unnecessarily. His very ideas of leading life fail to impress her. When his parents and relatives make a fuss about her sterility, she refuses to adapt herself with his humdrum life. To Jagua, marriage is nothing but frustration. She repents over her decision of getting married with a coal man against her own will:

She found that she had obeyed her parents but now they were not there to see her misery and they would never understand her longing, the hot thirst for adventure in her blood (167).

What hurts Jagua the most is that she does not have her own child. In this regard N. U. Akpam writes, “To the extent that children were the most important thing in the world ....{ and } every man and woman must have as many as they could ” (Akpam 6). Jagua desperately wants to be mother of child. She also consults the doctor. But all her efforts go in vain. Jagua also knows it well that her husband has illegal sexual relationship with other girls as well. He takes periodical leave for this reason:

Jagua knew that he took periodical leaves to his home town to look at some maiden who had been procured for him; she heard also that they brought him brides to the petrol filling station. She took the blame of sterility, and it was becoming a thing between them (167).

Jagua finds it hard to adjust herself with her husband. Similarly she does not dare to go back to her parents because she considers that her behavior will defame the family. To Jagua, adjusting herself with her husband is as difficult as going back to stay with her parents. This crucial moment in her life really smothers her a lot. Her frustration in married life makes her rebellious and she visits Lagos to live free and independent life. C. Brian Cox, in his work *African Writers* Vol. I, writes Jagua “is also a quest heroine” (Cox 229). In Lagos, Jagua seems to be selfish and unrealistic in her approach, when she selects Freddie as her would be husband. Jagua is a woman who will not get married with any man and so it is “her thrust into dangerous adventures by her search for the ideal hero” (229).

Like most of the African novelists, Cyprian Ekwensi is primarily concerned with the legacy of colonialism, the loss of cultural identity, the confusion, chaos and calamity. Jagua is the representative of traditional African woman who gets attracted towards the glamour of city life. She is called childless and is a kind of blot to motherhood. Motherhood is pure and sacred in traditional African society and barren woman like Jagua has no respect in such a society. High

life in cities, therefore, allures these women greatly. Had there been no coherent development in cities, these women would not have dared to enter cities to try their luck. When these women become part of city life, they find it difficult to get well salaried jobs there. Being illiterate, the woman like Jagua has no other choice but to accept the business of prostitution in city. There is not a single woman in the universe that enters the said business of prostitution willingly. She knows it well that prostitution is not a good business. Until and unless she is young, beautiful and charming, she is sellable. It is through the portrayal of Jagua that Ekwensi highlights the pitiable condition of prostitutes in city. These prostitutes desperately want to settle in their lives. They know it well that prostitution is the business that is not going to last for longer span of time. The said business declines with beauty and charm. Therefore, these women find it hard to return to their hometown. To them, going forward is as difficult as going backward. Their search for settlement in life generally goes in vain. In this way, Ekwensi mocks the glamour of city culture that attracts an illiterate woman like Jagua towards the business of prostitution.

Ekwensi, in his novel *Jagua Nana*, also brings to our notice the cultural transition in term of language. The very title of the novel *Jagua Nana* signifies the hybridity of language. The people in Lagos called her “Jagua because of her good looks and stunning fashions. They said she was Ja-gwa, after the famous British prestige car” (5). While comparing Jagua to the famous British car, Ekwensi considers Jagua as a commodity to be used and thrown away in the materialistic world. Throughout the novel, the very name Jagua seems to be used to indicate prestige, luxury, rich fashion, worldliness, style, civilization and glamour in the manner of British car. Everybody, except her brother Fonso, used to call her by the name Jagua. However, Fonso calls her by the name Nana.

In this context, G. Gulam Tariq in his book *Contemporary African Novel* writes:

Ekwensi has used symbolism as a narrative technique to depict Nigerian situation in his novels. Lagos city symbolizes new life, modernity and urbanization. As a physical location, it deserts villages attracting men and women by offering opportunities for individual development, both socially and materially. The city is also an outward sign of affluence in its glitter of night- lights, its wide roads, department stores, palatial buildings and luxuries of life. It offers new exciting life style (132).

Language, being one of the most important forms of communication, helps us to form an opinion about other people and their cultures. Similarly, pidgin is also an essential aspect of the

complex city life. Both Freddie and Jagua are an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria but they always prefer to use pidgin English, “because living in Lagos City they did not want too many embarrassing reminders of can or custom”(5). Their speech habits underline their double standards. These double standards help them to conceal their originality. The very idea of concealing their originality in order to amalgam with newly adopted city life is the mark of cultural transition. It focuses on the strong influence of colonialism and city culture.

In the novel *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi depicts how the impact of Western culture greatly affects political system in city. He uses city as a metaphor to highlight corrupting influence of Westernization on traditional African society. The political system of traditional African society was based on morals, ethnicity and religiosity. It used to revolve around the good of common people. Ekwensi mocks at the growing tendency of Africans to give up their traditional long lasting system of governance that has real concern for the wellbeing of African people. In cities, politics has become an arena for getting rich in life. The political leaders of the city have no real concern for social development. The evils of colonialism such as corruption, brutality, violence, cut-throat competition and cheating are clearly visible in the dirty politics of city. The supreme importance is given to materialistic aspect for getting victory in elections. Through the representation of Freddie, Ekwensi delivers a message that politics is not an arena for the common people and an innocent person like Freddie suffers a lot in the game of politics. In this way, Ekwensi in his novel *Jagua Nana* brings out a major change in the political system of cities.

Ekwensi scorns corrupt political life of city in *Jagua Nana*. The novel is the compact study of political transition in Nigeria. The rapid growth in urbanization has introduced evils such as corruption, brutality, violence, cut- throat competition and cheating to the political aspect of city life. The strong impact of colonialism forces the leaders and bureaucrats of the political arena to blindly accept social, political, public and private aspects of the colonizers. In *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi makes fun of the developing tendency of Africans to abandon their long lasting system of governance. In the world of cut-throat competitions and the clash between rival parties, the innocent people like Freddie are murdered. In the traditional African society, these political evils are rarely found.

In the novel *Jagua Nana*, Freddie is going to contest an election against Uncle Taiwo in Obanla constituency. Uncle Taiwo is a diplomatic politician who works as the party agent for

Other Party 2, one of the big political parties, in Lagos. John Povey rightly writes about Uncle Taiwo:

Ekwensi's most successful character....( he) is large, gross and confident. His false laugh booms out unhumorously on all occasions. With his crass appetities, his shameless and ruthless bargaining for votes, he becomes the epitome of all vicious power hungry politicians-----he becomes not a caricature, but an appalling archetype of human greed--- -he is---and African who has chosen to absorb and use all that is worst in European ways (Povey 83).

It is Uncle Taiwo who brings Jagua into the arena of political life. He makes fun of her for not being interested in the politics of the city:

I goin' to teach you everythin' about politics. You think you know nothing about politics; and you call yourself Lagos woman! He roared with laughter and roared again and she was embarrassed because his laughter told her it was a shameful thing not to be interested in the fortunes of city (130).

Contesting an election in Lagos city is by no means an easy task. People, most of the time, don't believe in an ideology but in money. Money is the supreme power in the game of politics. Jagua, being aware of the dirty game of politics, advises Freddie not to contest an election in Obanla against Uncle Taiwo. She warns Freddie:

No Freddie, I no wan' you to win ..... Politics not for you, Freddie. You got education. You got culture. You're a gentleman an' proud. Politics be game for dog. And in dis Lagos , is a rough game. De roughest game in de whole world. Is smelly an' dirty an' you too clean an' sweet. I speakin' frank to you, Freddie (137).

Ekwensi, here, wants to point out that politics is not an arena that is meant for good people. The thirst for political power makes people morally corrupt. Uncle Taiwo and Freddie Namme represent two different worlds that are really contrary to each other. Teaching, being a noble profession, can contribute to the development of nation. On the contrary, politics can lead nation to destruction, if it is misused. Ekwensi refers politics as the dirty game in the entire world. This dirty game of politics creates a kind of smell that makes life unworthy of living. It is Freddie who has tried to achieve the dignified Westernized respectability through his higher studies in London. His thirst for knowledge is meant for wealth, power and self-esteem. He should not have entered the politics of city life. However, it is through Freddie's ingress into

politics that Ekwensi focuses the corrupting influence of city life on the mentality of the traditional African people.

Jagua gives Freddie certain guidelines regarding how elections can be won in cities. She thinks that wearing smart cloths and appearing distant from the people have little effect in politics. She asks Freddie to befriend with the people from lower strata of society. He also makes him cautious about Uncle Taiwo who is distributing presents to the people. The whole city of Obanla is plastered with pictures of Uncle Taiwo and all the women have received match boxes and cooking stoves with his portrait on them. The school children have also received exercise books with Uncle Taiwo's picture on them.

All this shows the dirty side of political life in cities. Uncle Taiwo leaves no stone unturned to get success in the election. Ekwensi further makes Freddie's intention clear about his entry into politics. Freddie has no real intention of serving people through politics. In fact Freddie prefers to the arena of politics because he considers it as one of the easiest means of getting rich in life. Freddie informs Jagua:

I wan' money quick- quick; an' politics is de only hope (137).

Ekwensi explores the diplomacy of the political candidates for impressing the voters of Lagos. Election campaign is the gateway for these political leaders to confront the voters in every possible manner. It provides a golden opportunity to the political leaders for creating a good impression about themselves in the minds of their voters. Therefore, these political leaders never fail in their motives. Their speeches are nothing but an exaggeration of idealized Lagos life. During the election campaign the speaker promises "that if O.P.2 won there would be bigger markets, education would be free and medical treatment prompt and efficient. There would be wider roads built to all the nooks and the corners of the island city so that it would be a real example to the whole world" (138).

Jagua enjoys herself in the election campaigns when she accompanies Uncle Taiwo. As Jagua is to address her speech to Lagos market women during the election campaign, Uncle Taiwo asks her to make tall and false promises. He advises Jagua to tell the voters to vote for O.P.2 as he considers his party to be the best one in Oblana. He further asks Jagua to give false promises to voters regarding free market stall, trade, and free education to children. He advises Jagua to assure voters with "No more unemployment. Women mus' be treated right. Dem mus' have status. Dem mus' have class" (142).

All this clearly shows that nobody has real concern for socio-economic equalities in city life. All these tall and false promises of political leaders are meant for grabbing political power. They want to succeed in the political arena by any means. The problems of the common people will never haunt them once they get into political power. Jagua tries her best to defame Freddie. She also tries to put an end to her personal relationship with Freddie. Jagua, now, has no more interest in Freddie because he is married to Nancy. During the election campaign, she strives to spoil the character of Freddie in every possible manner.

His name is Freddie Namme, this Englandder. And do you know where he went to marry his wife? From Sa Leone. It is one thousand miles from Lagos. The people do not speak Yoruba there, neither do they speak Ibo or Hausa. It is different part of Africa. Now tell me; if you vote for a man marrying such a foreign woman, do you think he will understand what you want, you Nigerian women? (146).

To harm a person for a little purpose or no purpose is a common aspect in city life. The ways of city life are mostly mysterious, insecure and uncontrolled. In a cut throat competition for political power, Freddie is murdered and it is Uncle Taiwo who is held responsible for the death of Freddie. Ekwensi explores the brutality when he writes:

A man was lying in the gutter with the blood gurgling from his mouth. His head seemed to have been broken into two halves. At first she thought he was quite dead, but looking closely, she saw that he moved his hands. It was Freddie Namme (153).

With the death of Freddie Namme, Ekwensi succeeds in focusing social immoralities and political injustices of city life. In the novel, Freddie appears to be an intruder whose arrival into politics remains the major cause of his death. Had he not taken an interest into the politics of city, the calamity in his life would not have taken place. In the novel, Ekwensi also presents another instance of violence when he writes:

The taxi – driver was stabbed and thrown into the street – gutter with the open drain. And there they found him in the morning (123).

Traditional African people value blood relationship. They are least money oriented and have a great concern for the members of family. Jagua's father knows it well that Jagua has committed a great mistake by being a prostitute in Lagos. The very fact might have made him upset throughout his life. But, after all, Jagua is his daughter and he loves her heartily. When

Jagua's father is in his death bed, he misses her badly and desires to see her. Her brother Fonso informs her:

He doesn't want your money now, in death. He jus' want you-Jagua, his daughter who he love. I use to jealous you because of how Papa gone foolish with love for you, Jagua. You, the wayward one; we all try, try, but no: is only you. Now, he's dyin', and he forget all you done him----- (174).

Ekwensi, here, points out the comparison between two different outlooks that of city and village. Jagua's father represents traditional African society. He is ready to forgive his daughter who has committed mistakes after mistake. On the contrary, Jagua who used to be always ready to sacrifice everything for the sake of Freddie leaves no stone unturned to defeat him in the election. She does it purposefully because Freddie has got married with Nancy. This feeling of vengeance is probably the result of city culture.

The corrupting impact of city life corrupts Nana to a considerable degree and distances her from her roots. This is nothing but a transitional phase in her life. Finally, Jagua returns to her village Ogabu and achieves economic independence with Uncle Taiwo's money in her possession. In Ogabu, she succeeds in distinguishing between two different worlds. "The atmosphere in Ogabu had a quality about it totally different from the Lagos atmosphere. That driving, voluptuous and lustful element which existed in the very air of Lagos, that something which awakened the sleeping sexual instincts in all men and women and turned them into animals always on heat, it was not present here. Here in Ogabu, men dressed well but sanely. Women were beautiful but not brazen. They had become complementary to the palm trees and the Iroko, the rivulets and the fertile earth. They were part of their surrounding as natural as the wind. Whereas in Lagos MAN was always grappling to master an ENVIRONMENT he had created. It was money, money, yet more money. She did not find the same rush here, the desire to outstrip the other fellow. No time, sorry, too busy, time is short. Time, time....." (180,181).

### **Conclusion:**

The novel, in this way, highlights the poisoning effects of city culture. Ekwensi artfully inculcates faults in his weak characters. These faults cause doom to them. These characters are cut off from their village life. In the city, people who indulge themselves in short term gains and cheap pleasures miss out the real happiness and prosperity in life. Afterwards,

they face many problems that damage their reputation badly. It is the effects of colonialism and urbanization that cause significant changes in the life of traditional African people. Through his weapon of realism, Ekwensi brilliantly acquaints readers to various evils of city life. Thus, in the light of above analysis, one can find that the present novel of Cyprian Ekwensi reflects cultural transition in terms of education, marriage, behavior, language, politics and morality.

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