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www.the-criterion.com

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Countering Conrad: A Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

Gitanjali Gogoi

Assistant Professor
Department of English
N.N. Saikia College, Titabar.
Assam. India.

I am talking about a story in which the very humanity of black people is called in question.

Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa*

The first thing is that the African novel has to be about Africa... But Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape—it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position.

Chinua Achebe, "Thoughts on the African
Novel"

This is how Chinua Achebe expressed his response towards two different narratives—first, Joseph Conrad's representation of Africans in his novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and second, African writers' role in representing their own people and land. Achebe said that after reading a number of European writings revolving around Africa, he began to understand that "there is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like." He found that European representation of Africa and Africans was always a prejudiced one. European writers imposed a "derogatory narrative upon Africa" and the problem occurred when such narratives were "arrogantly proffered to you as your story" (Achebe, *Home* 24, 45, 41) with the stamp of universality and without a consideration that the Africans might have something to say.

These realizations were quite clear in Achebe's mind when he objected Conrad's manner of representing Africa in his short novel *Heart of Darkness*. For Achebe, Conrad's novel stood for "Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest." Achebe objected the dehumanizing portrayal of Africans by Conrad and was shocked to see that such an offensive and deplorable book was recognized as a part of the canon of great literature and remained one of the most commonly prescribed books in literature courses of American Universities. For him, such reception of the novel helped in perpetuating racism in Western countries and also proved the fact that "white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely unremarked." (Achebe, *An Image* 2, 12-13)

Heart of Darkness might be read, of course, as most readers do, as a critique of European imperialism, but "Conrad's powerful restaging of the primitivism of the Other makes Achebe's reading of racism in that novel quite convincing." (Simatei, 231) According to Achebe, Conrad's novel did not deserve the canonical status it had been given by western critics. While Achebe admitted that *Heart of Darkness* did have its memorably good passages and moments, he was

completely resolved in his criticism of the book. He found that the hundreds and hundreds of books that were churned out in Europe and other western countries gave a stereotyped image of Africa and Africans as if to establish it as the only way to write about the continent. He felt that canonical literary books routinely represented Africa in a biased way. According to him, in such a crucial point of time, when European desire to create "the tradition of an Africa inhabited by barely recognizable humanity have taken their toll" (Achebe, *Home* 47), African writers must take up the responsibility to represent Africa and counter European biased and stereotyped representations. He emphasized that only the Africans can describe their own continent in the best and most realistic manner. For him it was the only way to disprove the image of Africa created by European writers like Conrad. He asserted that the story of Africa could not be told by any outsider as "the victims of racist slander have always known better than any casual visitor, even when he comes loaded with the gifts of a Conrad." (Achebe, *An Image* 21)

So, when Achebe took up writing from inside, his aim was to glorify the African past and to erode the racist ideology by which that past had been devalued. He said, "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them." (Achebe, *Hope* 45) Achebe's very first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) exemplified this aim of the novelist. It was Achebe's counter-narrative against Conrad's biased narrative about Africa. The root of *Things Fall Apart* was in the urgency of self assertion and reclaiming African identity in the face of the severe colonial negation of the existence of Africans. The aim of my article is to establish how, in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe was successful in countering Conrad and proving him wrong.

Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness*, undoubtedly criticized Europe's imperialist exploitation of Africa's natural resources and of the native Africans. But in doing so, Conrad presented himself as a "veritable offspring of nineteenth-century European prejudices about Africa." (Okafor, 18) Conrad's dehumanizing portrayal of Africa could hardly escape any conscious reader's notice. No reader can overlook the fact that in projecting Africa, Conrad placed it as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality." (Achebe, *An Image* 3) Throughout the novel, Conrad gave a picture of Africa as a dark place, 'the Other world' in possession of a power that could turn any civilized European into a beast. The story of *Heart of Darkness* revolved around a character called Mr. Kurtz, an agent of the Belgian Trading Company in the Congo. Kurtz, in spite of having European refinements and sensibilities, succumbed to the dark powers of the region. He had fallen seriously ill and Marlow, the supposed rescuer of Kurtz, made a journey through the Congo River to restore him from the pit of darkness. It was this journey that gave Conrad ample opportunity to portray the region. Marlow, the mouthpiece of Conrad, felt as if they have arrived in a prehistoric region, where the earth and its inhabitants appeared as something ominous. While the atmosphere could make one feel being in possession of an 'accursed inheritance', its inhabitants, 'the prehistoric men' provoked the suspicion whether they were human or not. Marlow said, "No, they were not inhuman...that was the worst of it—the suspicion of their not being inhuman." Though Marlow did not have any close contact with any of the natives, he had a black fireman— "to look at him was as edifying as seeing a dog in a parody of breeches and a feather hat, walking on his hind legs." (Conrad, 186, 187)

By the time Marlow reached the Inner Station, the trading post administered by Mr. Kurtz, it was too late because not only was Kurtz on the doorstep of death but also was a

transformed human being with equally fractured morals of life that European upbringing had conferred on him. Kurtz, who had tremendous talents as an orator, writer, artist, explorer, administrator and had great intellect, was now under the deadly grip of the dark and mysterious power of the region. It was as if Kurtz, when let loose from European restraints and planted down in the tropics, lost himself in the darkness and yielded his soul to the dark powers from whose grip neither his European refinements nor Marlow could save him. Though Conrad did not give any detailed description of the 'unspeakable rites' that were practised in the region in Kurtz's presence and in which Kurtz himself had participated, yet Conrad made it clear that these abominable practices had the power to turn a civilized European into a savage.

Kurtz is deeply torn between the power and pleasure that such new knowledge conveys and the pangs of guilty conscience at the crimes he has committed in the process of gaining that knowledge, thereby forfeiting his soul. (Firchow, 26)

Thus Kurtz, in his mission to dominate and exploit the natives, gave away his soul to the satanic powers of the dark region. Only at the last moment of life, Kurtz could make out the monstrosity of what he had committed; only before death, he could see the horror of the powers he had succumbed to.

Conrad described how the natives were showing their protest against taking Kurtz away by making thunderous yells—"they shouted together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany." (Conrad, 236) While this crowd thus showed their helplessness and disapproval for being separated from Kurtz, a black woman also appeared in the scene, who, without uttering a word, showed her protest by stretching her bare arms over the river. Conrad describes: "From right to left along the lighted shore moved a wild and gorgeous apparition of a woman... she was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent... ominous and stately." (225-226) But Conrad did not stop here. He made the picture of this African woman more acute by drawing a white European woman in the last part of the novel. This woman was betrothed to Mr. Kurtz. He described her in these words: "She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering... This fair hair, this pale visage, this pure brow, seemed surrounded by an ashy halo... Their glance was guileless, profound, confident and trustful" (247) The difference between these two women was thus intensified. The African woman was thus placed as a "savage counterpart to the refined, European woman." (Achebe, *An Image* 8) The mystery of darkness was thus aggravated.

Throughout the novel, Conrad lavished every opportunity on Marlow to speak, but he gave hardly any chance for the black natives to speak. These natives were always described as a crowd, howling and leaping, clapping hands and rolling eyes, making crude noises and horrid faces, but were not given a chance to speak up their minds. Only in two occasions, did Conrad make them speak—one, by the cannibal who wanted Marlow to let them eat the attackers standing on the bank of the river and another native who informed Marlow that Kurtz was dead.

As stated earlier, this one-dimensional representation of Africans by Conrad was challenged by Achebe and if we now shift our attention to Achebe's novel, we will find that Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart*, tried to put everything that would prove Conrad wrong. Here, Achebe's writing about African society was intended to challenge the misconception about Africa and Africans by telling the story from an insider's point of view. Achebe's purpose was to prove that Conrad's was not the only way to see the Africans and that before the arrival of

Europeans, Africans did have culture and social systems and, though unintelligible and so evil for the Europeans, Africans had their own sense and ways of defining the world around them.

The subject matter of *Things Fall Apart* is the encounter of the European and the African world. Achebe portrayed the history of Igboland in the late 19th century. Igboland was the territory of south-eastern part of what is today known as Nigeria, located on the banks of the Niger River. He presented the Igbos as simple and innocent people who formed a nation before coming of the white men. Achebe exhibited that in pre-colonial times, Igbo nation had hundreds of independent towns and villages. The men folk carried out their affairs according to the title or rank which they attained in society, and also on the basis of their age or occupation. While the main narrative was that of the protagonist Okonkwo of Umuofia and his tragic failure in his resistance against British Imperialism and Christian missionary incursions into his society, Achebe lost no chance to showcase Igbo culture and value systems, the Igbos' sense of life and the world.

The story of *Things Fall Apart* revolved around Okonkwo. He was one of the leaders of Umuofia; he was courageous, strong and a wealthy man and had three wives; he was a warrior and upholder of Igbo culture. Okonkwo lived in a society which was well organized and harmonious; it was a society where man's diligence and personal achievements were greatly valued, where a man couldn't ascend to a higher position on the basis of what he inherited. It was a society where a perfect balance was maintained between the individual and the community. The harmonious community life was seen in the close interactions among the Igbos on various occasions and in the great respect they held for the village elders. The importance they put in '*chi*' (personal god) showed their belief in personal effort in achieving anything in life.

... the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands. (Achebe, *Things* 27)

Okonkwo inherited nothing from his father Unoka; whatever he achieved was by dint of his own hard work and determination. But surpassing the community and disobeying its ethics were never tolerated in Umuofia. When Okonkwo broke the law of the 'Week of Peace', he was heavily fined. He was banished from his village for seven long years because he had killed, though mistakenly, a person of his own clan, which was considered a sin by the Igbos.

Igbos had great reverence for their ancestors. These ancestral spirits were the intermediaries between the material and the spiritual world. They were thought to be the protectors of the present and guarantors of the future; they cleared doubts and worries, settled disputes and gave judgment on cases placed before them. A spectacle can be seen in *Things Fall Apart* when nine masked ancestral spirits, *egwugwu*, appeared in the *ilo*, the village green, on a particular occasion, each representing nine villages of the clan including Umuofia. These masked spirits were, of course, the members of the clan but for the occasion, they, along with all the spectators, took themselves for the ancestors; these nine villagers also forgot their real identities for the occasion and assumed the role of their ancestors with sincerest effort. This appearance of ancestral spirits was not meant for entertainment but for serious causes as many disputes among villages, families, and individuals were placed before the spirits who used to declare the judgment. Everyone in the village was bound to obey the ultimate verdict pronounced by the ancestral spirits. Igbos believed that the ancestors had the wisdom and power to influence their lives. In fact, the aim of every Igbo man was to secure a position among the ancestors after death

and thus to perpetuate his life. Therefore the act of suicide was considered as the gravest sin and a man who took his own life did not deserve a burial.

To die without burial is the worst thing that could happen to an Igbo person because burial suggests both a physical and spiritual transaction with the ancestors; burial sets one off on the ancestral journey among the spirits. To die without one implies that you have lost all connections with the ancestors, with the people and the land. (Okpala, 563-64)

Therefore, Okonkwo's dead body was considered untouchable as he had taken his life and Igbos never touched the body of the person who had desecrated the earth by committing a sin.

Achebe showed that the Igbos were strong adherents of their social, cultural and religious tradition. He projected Igbo hospitality in fine details. Again he gave extensive data of Igbo festivals and celebrations. The New Yam Festival, the Pumpkin Festival, the Week of Peace etc. were the markers of Igbos' life of togetherness and unity. Igbos' love for their relations was seen in the way they used to invite them from neighboring villages on special occasions. For them, enjoyments and celebrations were possible only with their kinsmen.

Another cultural aspect of the Igbos was their concern for hygiene and love for food. Before cooking, all cooking pots, calabashes, and wooden bowls were thoroughly washed and a great variety of dishes were prepared. Chief among Igbo food were yam *foo-foo*, vegetable soup, bitter leaf soup, wine tapped from the raffia palm, etc. Again the Igbos' elaborate rituals observed in marriage, their communal rejoicing over a betrothal, and mutual understanding in settling bride-price are all beautifully described by Achebe. Music played an important role in Igbo society. They used to beat drum in various occasions and enjoyed playing various instruments like flute, *ekwe* (a type of drum), *udu* (drum made from pottery) and *ogene* (a kind of gong).

Achebe showed the Igbos as great believers of god. They believed in a number of gods who occupied different domains. Their principal god was *Chukwu*. Below him, there were a number of deities who occupied different domains. *Ikenga* was every Igbo's personal ritual object and *chi* was their personal god. *Ani* was the goddess of earth and fertility, *Amadiora*, the god of thunder, *Ufiojioku*, the god of harvest and *Anyanwu* was the sun god. Thus Achebe took his reader through the narrative to reveal African culture and religion and to prove the beauty behind all these beliefs and observations.

Achebe's next undertaking was to show the beauty and dignity of African language. While Conrad denied speech to the Africans, Achebe provided enough scope for his characters to speak. Conrad's denial of speech to the native Africans also suggested his denial of humanity to them. This stand of Conrad was challenged by Achebe when he put dialogues in his characters' mouths and that too very dexterously.

In *Things Fall Apart*, he showed that the Igbos had a very high regard for the art of conversation. Achebe exhibited the Africans' rich oral tradition and embellished the language with proverbs, myths, folk tales, fairy tales, riddles, anecdotes, songs etc. Achebe stressed that in Igbo society, a person was respected for his use of proverbs in conversation. The art of speech was highly valued because it proved not only a person's skillful handling of language but also his depth of knowledge.

The greater the body of lore the speaker possesses, the more effective his conversation will be... Folklore can be fully understood only in terms of its usage in conversation and

Achebe clearly shows how folklore acts as verbal shorthand in communication. (Ferris, 25)

Thus their language became aphoristic and beautiful. The more important point is that the use of proverbs and folk tales, myths and songs in conversation served as an effective medium of rendering moral education and worldly wisdom to the young generation. Achebe showed that though the Igbos did not have a formal education system, they conferred moral lessons upon the young through their oral literature. Proverbs such as "If a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings", "When a man says yes, his 'chi' says yes also", "Mother is supreme", "If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others" etc. reflected the wisdom of the Igbos. Again the folk tales, such as the one about the quarrel between Earth and Sky, the trickster tale about the Tortoise and the Birds, the myths of the Mosquito, of Locusts, of the Kite etc. were also suitably fitted in the structure of the novel.

In the Igbo society, oratory was greatly valued. They believed that a man can manifest his power through oratory. Achebe displayed this oratory through a number of characters. For example, when Okoye, a villager, asked Unoka, Okonkwo's lazy father, to return the money he had borrowed, Unoka, with his oratorical skill, succeeded in getting rid of the problem and persuading Okoye that he would return the money only after he would return his bigger debts. He says: "I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first." (7-8) Again the power of rhetoric was seen in another occasion when Ogbuefi Egeugo, the powerful orator, was entrusted with the responsibility to excite anger in the villagers' minds and to make them ready to raise a war against the neighboring village Mbaino where an Igbo woman was killed.

The most striking feature of Achebe's use of language was the way he succeeded in manipulating the style of English in the mould of the African way of speaking. Achebe proved that oral lore and proverbs were not only the basic vehicle of expression, but with their infusion into English, he exhibited the greatness of African oral tradition which had been denied by European writers like Conrad.

The demand that Africans art be seen as distinctive in its social forms was accompanied by the project of recovering a sense of the importance of African oral art as the indigenous equal of the European literary tradition. (Ashcroft *et al*, 126)

Thus Africa's oral tradition was placed in equal position with European written narrative. Achebe attempted to prove that though the Africans had not developed a written tradition by the time of colonial invasion, their oral tradition nevertheless was a highly wrought and varied medium of expression. He exhibited this rich heritage of African oral literature through his manipulation of English. Such an achievement in language was an apt answer from Achebe to Conrad's denial of language to the Africans.

While Conrad represented the native Africans as a crowd shouting, leaping, howling, making faces and horrid sounds, and no character was treated individually except as stereotypes, Achebe portrayed his characters individually and conferred on them particular roles and positions in the narrative. Therefore *Things Fall Apart* had a great number of characters all having their own individual traits. Besides Okonkwo, the protagonist, around whom the whole narrative moved, there were other important characters, such as Unoka, Okonkwo's father, Obierika, Okonkwo's friend, Ezeudu, the eldest person of Umuofia, Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle etc. All these characters were individually treated and given due positions in the

story. In portraying Igbo men, Achebe showed how well built they were and what tremendous physical strength they had. Unlike the 'men in chain' in *Heart of Darkness*, Achebe here presented a picture of a men folk who were warriors and great wrestlers. The village wrestling matches were organized in Umuofia with the purpose to establish one's physical power and to have the chance to attain high reputation in the clan.

Though the Igbo society was male dominated, Achebe did not leave the womenfolk behind. He showed that Igbo people had great respect for women. Any violence done to them by men was never tolerated in Umuofia. For Igbos, "Mother was Supreme" and "it is not bravery when a man fights with a woman." (Achebe, *Things* 133, 93) Okonkwo had three wives for whom separate huts were arranged. These three wives were portrayed to have their own individual characteristics, personal expectations and social roles as women. Achebe showed that there was a balance between the positions that male and female members occupy in Igbo society. For example, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves was male but his messenger was a priestess, likewise goddess *Ani* had a male messenger. Again the Igbos' craving for beauty was reflected through the woman characters. Igbo women scrubbed the walls and huts with red earth until they reflected light. They painted their bodies with cam wood and black dye (*uli*) in beautiful patterns. On special occasions, they plaited their hair in *Otimili* fashion and decorated their waist with fifteen strings of *jigida*. Marriage was quite an elaborate process in Igbo society and the bride-price was fixed with the help of broomsticks. To be a virgin before marriage was considered very highly by the Igbos; it was taken as a symbol of beauty, love and unity. Igbo women performed important duties not only in the house but also in the field and helped the men in cultivation. Achebe presented Igbo women also as educators of their children. They were the storehouse of folk tales. They told tales to the children to teach them about life, human condition and moral conduct. Thus, portraying a number of female characters and conferring distinctive roles upon them, Achebe created them as the counterpart of Conrad's only African female figure "the barbarous and superb woman." (Conrad, 236)

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe of course exhibited his great love for his culture and tradition, but he didn't forget to point out its drawbacks. He became critical of many of the superstitions of the Igbos. The custom of throwing away newly born twins in the forest was such a point. Again, the custom for which the innocent boy Ikemefuna was killed was also treated critically. In such a way, Achebe maintained a balance in representing the African past. In upholding Igbo culture, he also remained critical towards some negative aspects of that culture and thus showed his consciousness as a writer who "cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration." (Achebe, *Hope* 45)

While Conrad was silent about the reaction of the natives regarding European invasion and colonial exploitation, Achebe gave a touching picture of how the European colonization had devastated African traditional life and shattered the very centre of their existence. One of the novel's important characters, Obierika, expressed his agony and helplessness: "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart." (176). Achebe tried to prove that colonization was not just a replacement of new notions into the natives' earlier ideas but it was a dislocation of the Africans' age old philosophy that they had sincerely preserved and propagated, it was the displacement of the world view and the value system that had been handed down to them from their great antiquity. Okonkwo's life was an example of such a dislocation. He preferred death to surrendering before a foreign culture and thus betraying his own. His death symbolized the crumbling of the old Africa with all its beauty and power. The white colonists in the novel lacked the capacity to perceive the human dimension of Okonkwo's death and the

District Commissioner, with Okonkwo's dead body hanging before his eyes, was planning to write a paragraph, if not a whole chapter, on Okonkwo.

In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point...Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading...There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details... (Achebe, *Things*, 208-09)

This clearly foretold the subsequent humiliation that the Africans would experience under colonial rule. Thus, Achebe's elaborate description of Africa with her religion, culture, language, tradition, songs and dances, grace, bounty, health and well being was placed in order to counterpoint the humiliation, dehumanization, the squalor and ugliness of colonial exploitation.

In such a way, Achebe succeeded in giving a counter to Conrad. As he believed that aliens could not talk about a continent whose culture was unknown to them, he simply expected them to hear the African writers. Through *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe wanted to convey that African people did not hear about culture for the first time from the Europeans, that their society was not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth, value and beauty.

Achebe consciously set out to contest imperial stereotypes of Africa in *Things Fall Apart* and successfully compels an acknowledgement of the existence of other non-Eurocentric 'cultures' and 'histories' as against the Western master narrative. (Pandurang, 18)

Achebe's portrayal of African society, culture, characters, language and religious and, traditional beliefs was a proof that Conrad's was not the only way to look at and understand Africa; Africans did have the potentiality to represent itself, truthfully and realistically.

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