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## A Balanced Critique of Igbo and White Cultures in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

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In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbos are portrayed at a crucial moment in their history. At the end of the nineteenth century, the invasion of the European colonial power is threatening to change almost every aspect of their society. Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, never doubts the long-established wisdom of his ancestors. He is unable to get used to changing conditions in the initial days of the colonial rule. In his lone fight against the colonists, he is ultimately defeated and he has to commit suicide. His death foreshadows the slow but sure collapse of the traditional Igbo culture under the impact of the colonial rule. In the novel, Achebe has compared and contrasted the judicial administration, oral culture, agricultural economy, medicinal practices and religious rites of the Igbo culture with similar Western mores. The present paper makes an attempt to analyse how Achebe has made an unbiased assessment of Igbo and white cultures in his novel.

Novelist, critic and poet, Chinua Achebe (1930-2013), is one of the renowned Nigerian writers. His first novel and his masterpiece *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a pioneering work of African fiction as it defies a long tradition of the Eurocentric representations of indigenous Africans as atrocious and uncivilized ones who need to be made progressive by the Europeans. Moreover, it blends oral and literary methods and thereby remodels the English language to communicate Igbo terminology and thoughts. It is this work that fairly paved the way for his being called "the patriarch of the African novel"

*Things Fall Apart* contains a fictional account of the eventual breakdown of Umoufia, an Igbo nation in the modern Nigeria, due to the advent of the white man in the late nineteenth century. Achebe has shown honorable uprightness in rendering his people's cultural past with both its positive attributes and drawbacks. He has made the natives realize that along with colonization their own beliefs and conformist ways of life led to their fall. Achebe's novel is the first of its kind in the sense that it analyses the effects of European colonialism on Igbo society from a compassionate African's perspective. He holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of the strengths and imperfections of both the Igbo and white cultures.

Achebe takes the title *Things Fall Apart* for his novel from a line in the poem *The Second Coming* by the twentieth century Irish poet W.B. Yeats. In his poem Yeats is apprehensive about the overthrow of public religious faith and the fissures in long-established community structures because of an inherent flaw in humanity. The mood that prevails in Yeats' poem is that only "dragon-ridden" days are ahead as old rules are no longer appropriate and there is nothing to replace them. In the novel Achebe ingeniously associates the same idea to the Igbo society of Umoufia. Here the traditional Umoufian world is falling apart under the joint impact of colonialism and its own underlying weaknesses. Also Achebe's warrior hero Okonkwo has to commit suicide because he adheres to the collapsed traditional ways of life and is averse to embrace Christianity.

In this connection, it is essential as well to mention the symbolic significance of the sudden arrival and the spread of the locusts in Umoufia after a very long time. Their settlement in Umoufia is a premonition to the imminent arrival of the colonizers which will change the countryside and the perception of the Umoufians irrevocably. The breaking away of the huge tree branches under the weight of the locusts figuratively suggests that the cultural heritage of Igbo society can no longer subsist under the assault of colonial rule.

*Things Fall Apart* has a tripartite structure. The first Part (Chapters 1-13) depicts Okonkwo's rise to eminence from his humble origins. Alongside, Achebe illustrates and examines the various aspects of the Igbo culture before the arrival of the white man. Some of them worth mentioning are their festivals and ceremonies, their customs and worship of the gods, their conventions of war and peace, the supreme importance they gave to kinship and hospitality, their rigid sense of justice and fairness, their absolute obedience to both human and spiritual authority, their economic system based on the exchange of goods and their verbal art and other social practices. Okonkwo's seven years of exile from Umoufia due to his accidental killing of a clansman happens in the last chapter of Part I of the novel and marks the beginning of things falling apart. The second Part (Chapters 14-19) deals with Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta, the emergence of the Europeans in the traditional Igbo world, the evangelistic campaigns of the Christian missionaries and the escalation of the crisis between the traditionalists and the Christians. The third Part (Chapters 20-25) chronicles how the colonist's administration, military power, education, medical service, legal system and lawful trade overwhelm the Igbo culture; it also records Okonkwo's return to Umoufia after his exile, his severe loathing towards the new regulation and his tragic end. The novel's twenty-five chapters "are upon closer analysis divided into four groups of six chapters each, with one pivotal chapter, XIII, where Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudo's son and must flee." (Robert Wren 23).

Achebe presents wide-ranging instances of the magnificence of Igbo culture in the novel, of which the most notable one is its judicial system. The village holds formal meetings to dispense justice in land quarrels, marital disputes, clashes between neighboring clans etc. Such village assemblies are led by the masked ancestral spirits of the clan, known as the *egwugwu*. The *egwugwu* stand for the nine village clans and their leader is called Evil Forest. The ceremonial visit of the *egwugwu* from their underground home, addressing themselves in a trembling, incomprehensible language, to administer justice is a frightening sight. In the novel Achebe devotes one whole chapter to describe the proceedings of the *egwugwu* in a quarrel that centers on the domestic violence between Uzowulu and his wife, Mgbao. On hearing both sides of the case, the *egwugwu* go away to consult together and come up once again with a reasonable, exceptional and undeniable verdict that reflects the knowledge and common sense of the elders esteemed by tradition. Indeed, the end result of the judgment establishes that the *egwugwu* are a spiritual and symbolic expression of the inner self of the clan.

Achebe then sarcastically remarks that women and children feel that the *egwugwu* are merely mortals posing themselves as ancestral spirits and they recognize Okonkwo among them, but they hold the fact within themselves out of respect to this dominant and secret cult in the clan.

The judicial administration of the Igbos also relies greatly on the pronouncement of the Earth Goddess, Ani, and the declaration of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. The Earth Goddess warns Okonkwo for severely beating his youngest wife, Ojiugo, for trivial reasons, during the holy Week of Peace. Later the Goddess banishes Okonkwo from Umoufia for seven years for his

accidental killing of a clansman. But in the western or modern judicial thought, Okonkwo's punishment may not be a simple banishment as his offence is close to homicide. Although the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves has prohibited Umoufia from participating in wars on many occasions, its decree to kill Ikemefuna cannot be justified.

The age of the Europeans announces a new legal system of judging cases based on the written English laws and judicial patterns. It goes against the traditional ways of discord solution defended by the unwritten Igbo cultural laws. Although the Europeans brag of having a highly organized and peaceful court of law, it is not found to be so excellent in meting out justice. For instance, at the District Commissioner's order, Okonkwo and five village elders are taken into custody, handcuffed, imprisoned, maltreated and fined two hundred bags of cowries as a compensation for the demolition of Reverend Smith's church by the *egwugwu*. The court messengers inform the Umoufians that they must pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries or their leaders will be hanged. By raising the fund, these messengers will make a profit as mediators. Again, when a meeting of the nine villages of the clan is arranged, the District Commissioner sends five court messengers to disperse the meeting. It is ironical that the Europeans, who often talk boastfully about bringing egalitarian institutions to the rest of the world, try to disband the clan meeting.

Another aspect of the fullness of Igbo culture that Achebe introduces in the novel is its verbal art stuffed with proverbs and folktales. The Igbos consider words as food and attribute the nourishing power and life sustaining quality of food to communication: "Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (Achebe 6). Throughout the novel Achebe makes his characters use proverbs both in informal conversations and in oratory. *The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them* (dissuading indolence and emphasizing the need for hard work), *If one finger brought oil, it soiled others* (highlighting the notion of collective responsibility), *A child cannot pay for its mother's milk* (meaning that certain things are invaluable, and cannot be fully interchanged) etc. are some of the Igbo proverbs employed by Achebe in the novel. The eloquent concepts, illuminating messages and practical wisdom of the Igbos can be gleaned from their use of proverbs. The contextual use of suitable proverbs develops the speaking skills of the person and makes his speech unforgettable. Certainly, "Proverbs are always appropriate, allowing a speaker to make his point tactfully and concisely. The concentration of meaning and evocative powers of the proverbs impacts a poetic quality to Achebe's prose" (Palmer 62). Many folktales, like that of the selfish tortoise and the birds, that of the Earth and Sky, that of Mother Kite and Daughter Kite etc. are also intertwined within the framework of the main story. Such folktales help to inculcate the clan's moral values in the children. "Igbo folklore saturates the novel, preserving the African elements despite the English prose" (Gardner 3).

The highly developed oral tradition of the Igbos shows that they are not just a group of savages in a jungle. But the Igbos don't seem to have shown any interest in knowing about the existence of the world and mankind outside their country. So the Europeans, on their arrival in the Igboland, find it to be their legal responsibility to educate the illiterate natives. The Igbos are disinclined to learn English because they think that they will never have to use English in their interaction. Their misconception about English is the main reason for their downfall. The introduction of schools by the Europeans helps the Igbos reduce the rate of their illiteracy. The first Christian missionary, Mr. Brown, has built a school in Umoufia and told the Igbos that their future leaders will have to

know how to read and write. Okonkwo's son Nwoye has shown interest in attending school. By the time Okonkwo returns to Umoufia from his exile, Nwoye is in a training college for teachers. The white man's instruction results in the coming out of a progressive and elite community, turning farmers to court clerks and teachers.

Achebe also relates the self-sufficiency farming of the Umoufians in which they concentrate on cultivating a wide range of crops such as corn, watermelon, beans, cassava and yams. These crops are necessary to feed themselves and their families. The Igbos observe *Week of Peace*, during which no work is done and people live in peace to honor the great goddess of the earth without whose blessing their crops will not grow. Then *The Feast of the New Yam* is held everywhere before the harvest begins, to adore the earth goddess and the ancestral spirits of the clan. New yams will be eaten only after submitting some to these powers. According to Kofi Awoonor, "The festival of New Yam is not only a thanksgiving but an occasion for affirming the group ethos, of communion with the ancestors and the gods, and a renewal of faith in the primal life force itself" (p 253)

Women's crops like corn, beans and cassava are commercial crops and they contribute to the family's income. Women play a vital role in mercantile activities. As a result, they have more direct contact with foreigners than men. They also become influential members of the society along with dominant male elders. Furthermore, the arrival of the Europeans also results in building trading stores. The deal in palm-oil and kernel also results in a business explosion "and much money flowed into Umoufia." (Achebe 161)

Achebe's narration of the medicinal practices of the Igbos contains a tinge of sarcasm. They have many irrational beliefs regarding infant mortality. They believe that an *ogbanje* (a "wicked" child) continually re-enters its mother's womb only to die again and again, thereby bringing about its parents great sorrow. In order to prevent a wicked child's return, they consult a medicine man to maim the dead body of the child. They also presume that if the *iyi-uwa*, the small buried pebble that is the *ogbanje*'s physical link to the spiritual world, is found when it is still alive, it will survive. But Achebe says that the Igbos administer effective herbal treatment for many diseases. The Europeans, on their arrival, have revolutionized the field of medicine, and the white missionary Mr. Brown has built a small hospital in Umoufia.

Coming to the religious practices of the Igbos, Achebe says the Igbos worship the supreme god (Chukwu), the personal god (Chi), and the ancestors who guard, advise and punish them. The core of the Igbo belief system is the general notion of *chi*. Each man has built a shrine, adjacent to his hut, where he has kept the wooden figures of his personal god and his ancestral spirits. The Igbos are nature worshippers also. They consult the goddess of the earth through the priest, Ezeani. The clan seeks wisdom from the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves (Agbala) through the priestess, Chielo. They also attach religious significance to the sacred silk cotton tree and the Evil Forest. The Igbos make different kinds of sacrifices to gods to eliminate diseases, increase productivity and to gain victory in wars with neighbours. The death of Ikemefuna is an example of human sacrifice made to keep away from war over an Umuofian woman, Ezeugo, who has been killed in Mbaino.

But through many circumstances Achebe makes us realize that the Igbo religious system has certain pitiless practices that have created unrest among its own believers. To mention a few, their religion has dictated that the new – born twins and people afflicted with leprosy, small pox and

swelling are a disgrace to the earth goddess and so they must be thrown into the Evil Forest. The *osu*(outcasts) are excluded from the main stream of the society and their posterity is doomed to share the same misfortune. Then there are the obviously irrational commands of the gods and the oracle that generate horror and unreliability rather than safety in the society. There is the demarcation of the wealthy, titled men and the unsuccessful men (*efulefu*) and women.

When the Christian missionaries ask the Igbos a plot of land to build their church, the village elders give them a part of the Evil Forest, believing that the evil spirits and forces there will kill the missionaries within a mercy period of twenty-eight days. When the church thrives there and none is hurt, the Igbo religion is dealt a harsh blow. So Eustace Palmer is right when he says that, "The secret of the new faith's success is precisely that it offers a refuge to all those whom the clan, for a variety of reasons, regard as outcasts. If the clan had not been so callous towards its underdogs, the white man's religion would not have taken hold. As it is, it is the *osu*, the parents of twins, and all those held in contempt because they have taken no titles who flock to the missionaries' banner"(pp.57-58).

Achebe carefully states both the positive and negative sides of Christianity, and its influence on the Igbos. He supports Nwoye's conversion to Christianity. Nwoye's bitter feelings towards his father's masculine values and unjustly severe ways, his fierce resentment over the sacrifice of Ikemefuna and his father's role in that murder are enough to justify it. Jonathan A. Peters has described Ikemefuna as a "Christ – figure," whose sacrifice inspires in some way Nwoye's later conversion to Christianity. It is not the principle of the Holy Trinity that has enthralled Nwoye, but the hymns of the new religion. Achebe's imagery of the words of the hymn as rain drops soothing Nwoye's "parched soul" refers not only to solace from the scorched heat of Africa but also to the act of bringing Nwoye out of his natural ignorance into illumination through Christianity. The new religion begins to answer many of the ambiguous questions of Igbo religion that have upset Nwoye's soul.

Achebe describes the two Christian Missionaries, Mr. Brown and his successor Rev. James Smith, as diametrically opposite in their outlook. The kind and patient Mr. Brown introduces a strategy of negotiation, empathy and friendliness between his people and the members of the clan. But Rev. Smith is prejudiced and contemptuous of Igbo beliefs. He insists that the Igbo clansmen who have been converted to Christianity should discard all their earlier beliefs. It is his radicalism that prompts the fervent convert Enoch to unmask an ancestral spirit and the subsequent demolition of Smith's church by the masked ancestral spirits.

Along with Christianity, the white men have also brought a government to safeguard their religious followers. If skirmishes between the villages involved any white missionaries or bureaucrats, the British soldiers would often butcher all villagers, instead of searching for and penalizing the guilty ones. For example they have decimated the entire village of Abame for killing the first white messenger. It is even said that they have hanged one man who killed a missionary.

In the concluding paragraph of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe says that the European District Commissioner, upon learning about Okonkwo's revolt against the Europeans and his suicide, thinks that it will make a "reasonable paragraph" in the book he is going to write about the colonized Africans. He has already selected the title of the book after much deliberation: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. The highly objectionable words like

*primitive, pacification, niger* etc. in the title of the book signify that the book will be written from a western perspective, denigrating the natives. Like Joseph Conrad (in *Heart of Darkness*) and Joyce Cary (in *Mister Johnson*) the Commissioner has planned to misrepresent Africa.

The Commissioner, the typical xenophobic colonizer, is oblivious of the richness and complexity of the Igbo culture. It is ironic that he has decided to write about the pacification of the locals when he himself has provoked the series of events leading to Okonkwo's suicide. Okonkwo's fall, like the disintegration of the whole African tribe, is an extensive and complex history. But the readers of the Commissioner's proposed book will never know about Okonkwo's epic protest against the missionaries and the colonial administration before his death. What they get is a "less objective and necessarily less accurate narrative" (Kortenaar 31). But the Commissioner's intended book will be an impossible future project because Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, has already retold the conquest of Africa, from Okonkwo's African point of view, rather than the Commissioner's European one. That is why Achebe writes in his book *Home and Exile*: "Until the lions produce their own historians, the story of the hunt will glorify only the hunter" (p.73).

At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, Oberika, Okonkwo's bosom friend, angrily speaks to the Commissioner, blaming him for his friend's death: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog....." (Achebe 187). Oberika's denunciatory remarks against the Commissioner are a direct expression of his decolonizing passion long hidden in himself. Although the novel ends in a plaintive note, Achebe is not wholly critical of his native Igbo culture that he both admires and grieves for.

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