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The True Africa in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract:

Africa is a culturally rich country which was earlier shown as a dark continent about which was unknown to the outside world for a long time. It was the undiscovered and scary place which the world feared. Such was an image which was created by non-African writers like Joseph Conrad in his work *Heart of Darkness*. The worldwide popular dark continent's true image was put out to the world by African writers like Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Ngugi waThiong'o, etc. These writers brought out the real African culture and literature. In this paper I want to bring out the raw and culturally rich Africa which Chinua Achebe has presented in his work 'Things Fall Apart'. Achebe has beautifully portrayed the African lifestyle and beliefs using phrases and idioms from the local language, using those as the base I will try to explore the African people, their lands and customs. I will also focus on the importance of cultivation, its value for the people and how land serves as a means and symbol of power. This work throws light on the traditions of African people, their beliefs towards their Earth goddess, their ancestral spirits, the role of land and agriculture as a means of life and power. The onset of the colonizers and the reaction of the Africans can also be observed in this work. This paper will focus on the normal African lifestyle, their customs and traditions and show how the reality is totally different from what writers like Joseph Conrad have earlier projected.

Keywords: customs, traditions, reality, culture, nature, Africa.

Introduction

How is an image created? One sees the thing whose image is to be created and then perceives whatever is visible to him/her. For example, around the 16th century, Europeans started to travel across continents for discovering and exploring unknown places and knowing what lies outside their country's borders. The travelers who went out and saw other countries

and their cultures reported back to the citizens of their own country about what they saw. They wrote about their experiences and adventures. The people who never went out made their minds about those outside places based on the traveler's accounts as either orally told to them or by reading their journals of the journey, to those people the image of outside places which they had never seen was created through readings and listening stories. If asked to the general public who have never been to Africa about what is the first thought that comes to their mind when they hear Africa, the answers might be forests, wildlife, dark skin, slavery, ivory, etc. These images are an outcome of someone else's perception they might or might not be true. These images do not completely show what Africa is these are just some things through which it is represented. This paper talks about the image of Africa as wrongly perceived by a non-African writer Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and the true image as presented by an African writer Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

Depiction of Africa in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

In '*Heart of Darkness*' Africa is portrayed as a primitive, dark, uncivilized continent where the natives are savages and are enslaved by the colonizers. They consider themselves as supreme and consider 'a white man's burden' to civilize these uncivilized people. Due to the language being a communication barrier the characters do not interact with the natives much thereby not knowing about what true Africa is and who are the African people. To the colonizers, they are just slaves which they can tie up in chains and get whatever precious materials they can extract from the African lands and earn profits.

The Africans are used as slaves, they do all the hard work, they paddle the boats carrying the colonizers even alarm, and protect them from the natives who are seen as their enemies. They are always under the suspicion of being attacked by the natives who are hiding around the banks of the river Congo so the Africans who are either at the side of the colonizers or are enslaved by them are appointed as the lookouts.

The colonizers came from the North and the climate of the North and the South was totally different. Africa being south of the equator is a hot country and the people from the north had to suffer a lot because of the change in climates. Africa was perceived as a country of darkness and death, many officials from the north died in Africa because of the weather, some committed suicide, some went mad and killed others as well. Commenting on the deaths of the white men in Africa Conrad writes, "*As if the Nature herself had tried to ward off intruders*". The sun was too much for the white men and even the country was also

unbearable to some. They considered the people savage, cannibals, wild, and uncivilized. One was even shocked to see a person wearing starched clothes. The definition of civilized for white men was following their manners, they even taught some black men and women their ways.

The inhumane treatment of the slaves is also visible through the images of the chain gang in the mines. White men came to extract raw materials for their business and trade and they used black men as their laborers, they were sold and bought like commodities, tied up in chains together like animals, lashed and starved, *“They were nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom.”*

Joseph Conrad put out an image of Africa which he as an outsider perceived through traveling and hearing stories from other travellers. This image portrayed a very untrue and one-sided picture of Africa, a dark and scary one that showed Africans as slaves, cannibals, savage, uncivilized people. The true and real image cannot be presented by an outsider, reality can only come out from the people who are either Africans or have experienced the real Africa, its culture, its people, its tradition and its beauty at the best.

The true Africa as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*

Chinua Achebe is known as the father of African literature. He is the pioneer of African writing. He is amongst the ones who started writing about the real Africa, about what truly it was, its customs and traditions, its people, their lifestyles, etc. ‘Things Fall Part’ is his debut novel in which he talks about the pre-colonial life in Southern Nigeria, a country in Africa. The novel surrounds the life of Okonkwo who is considered as the greatest warrior alive. He has a fiery temper for which he has to pay a very huge price, but most importantly he strives to protect his culture. He is ready to lay his life and remove the white men from his homeland but he instead meets a tragic end.

Achebe has portrayed the lifestyle of Igbo community from Southern Nigeria, he has shown how they live in clans, being a respected clan member means a lot to them. They strive for respect and power. Titles are given to the powerful people, the more the number of titles the more power one beholds. Wrestling is a way to compete and see which clan and clan member is the most powerful. As in the novel, Umofia the clan of the protagonist Okonkwo is the most powerful clan and every other clan fears Umofia, they surrender to Umofia whenever there is war like situation for the fear of being cleared out by their powerful and fierce warriors.

The Igbo community people live in peace and help each other. Whenever guests come at someone's hut they are offered palm wine and kola nut as a peace offering which means they are welcome to their obi. Farming is the main occupation and land is a source of power. The bigger the land the more powerful a person is. Yam is the main crop and it is called the king of crops. There are gender divisions amongst crops as well. Yam, the king of the crops is a man's crop and coco yams, beans, cassava are women's crops. They are heavily dependent on rains as Africa is a dry continent, there are times when it either didn't rain at all leading to a draught failing all the crops or times when it started pouring down heavily thus also ruining the hard work of the people. Marriage also shows the power status of a man. The bride price is an important part of marriage. The groom's family has to pay a bride price to the bride's family, it stands for the power status of the man and his family. A man who is more powerful, prosper and respected can have multiple wives, the number of wives represents the amount of respect and power one holds. Even though one man has many wives they all live happily together. They mutually share and help each other. The man has his own hut also called '*obi*' in Igbo, all other wives have their own huts in which they live with their children. During the plantation season, they all together work hard at their land, sow yam seeds, when there is no work on the farms they thatch and paint their compounds.

Igbo community prays to many Gods, *Chukwu* is their supreme God, the one who created heaven and earth. They listen to the Oracle of the Hills and Caves, the *Agbala*, and always follow his commands never disobey him. They pray to the earth goddess *Ani*, dedicate a Week of Peace to her. The Week of Peace is celebrated just before the plantations begin, no one is allowed to do any sort of violence during that week if one disobeys the commands he has to pay the price. Whenever they need help they consult the spirit of their dead father or relative. Every problem is solved by the final solution coming out from the *egwugwu* the masked men, the spirits of their ancestors. Every announcement is made by the beating of the drums, the rhythm decides the gravity of matters. The death of a person is announced by the drums and the ancient men perform funeral dances to these drum beats. Matchets are clanged, guns are fired, drums are beating, noble warriors are given grand funerals. There are many customs and traditions in the Igbo community from birth to death. Twins are considered as evil spirits and are thrown away in the Evil forest just after their birth. Anyone who dies of sickness is not given a proper funeral, their bodies are also thrown away in the Evil forest or they are left there when are about to die. They are considered an abomination to the land. Suicide is considered as an offense against the Earth goddess, the clansmen are not allowed to

touch the dead body of a person who commits suicide. The Evil Forest is the home for undesirable people. The punishment for any crime and criminal is decided by the title holders and the *egwugwu*. The crimes done by other clans are either resorted through war or settlements. Umofia never goes to war without consulting the Oracle of the Hills and the caves. The Oracle holds a very important role in every major decision the clansmen make. The Gods and ancestral spirits are both respected and feared, the people never disobey them and if they ever do they pay the price. Okonkwo, the protagonist breaks the peace in the Week of Peace between the harvesting and planting season by beating his youngest wife who forgets to give him food at the proper timing. The Week of Peace is dedicated to the earth goddess Ani, so Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess punishes him, he refuses to eat in the house of a man who has no respect for their gods and ancestors. Okonkwo has to offer one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth, and a hundred cowries at the shrine of the goddess. They celebrate various festivals to thank and seek blessings from their Gods like the Week of Peace, the Feast of the New Yam, etc. Various stories are told at such festivals such as of a wealthy man who set the mount of foo-foo so high that one could not see the people sitting on the other side. There are certain myths as well, one is of the ancient silk cotton tree being sacred, the young married women who desire children come to sit under its shade. One myth is of Okonkwo's daughter Enzima being possessed by the spirit of her dead siblings. Mothers tell their children folk stories of the cunning tortoise, the mosquitos love for the ear, and various other stories that have traveled from generation to generation.

There are certain rules and customs that one has to follow in the Igbo community. One cannot keep their twin children, they are not allowed to touch the dead body of a person who either committed suicide or dies by a sickness. No women can come in front of the *egwugwu*, no one can unmask an *egwugwu*, killing of the sacred python is a sin which can also result in the death of the killer as a punishment. The main lead of this novel commits an unintentional crime by killing a clansmen, no one is allowed to kill one's clansmen, if one does he has to flee the clan for seven years and his hut, compound, barn everything will be burnt down as a part of cleansing. Okonkwo kills a fellow clansman at a funeral, his gun misfires, he makes a mistake which is considered womanly by their society. He flees Umofia and goes to his motherland, Mbanta. A woman's funeral rites are done at her own villages, so Okonkwo's mother is also buried at her own village, Mbanta. In Mbanta mother is considered as supreme. The people in Mbanta believe that a man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, but one when hits a rough patch in life he finds refuge in the motherland. Okonkwo

also seeks refuge in his motherland but unfortunately, when he goes back to his fatherland after seven years he is devastated by the condition in which his community is. It is controlled and run by the white men and when he tries to overthrow them no one helps him, devastated by the outcome he commits suicide, the biggest sin one could do in the Igbo culture. He meets a tragic end for trying to save his community and culture.

The writer has not only shown the positive things about Africa but also the brutal realities as well, thus showing a true picture in the real sense. Hypermasculinity is praised in their communities, all men are supposed to be brave and not to show any feminine qualities. A lazy man or a man who is not interested in war and hard work is called *agbala*, a word for women in the Igbo language. Women are considered as inferior beings, they are treated as commodities, sometimes as priced possessions. The larger the number of wives the more respected a man is. Marriage is also like a trade where a price is put on the bride. This shows how Achebe has shown both sides of Africa in his work.

Similarities between *Things Fall Apart* and *The Heart of Darkness*

In both the works we see the white men coming into the picture, acting all helpful in the beginning, coming with the motives of exploration and trade but later calling them the civilized ones and trying to civilize the uncivilized African people. They had the 'white man's burden' in their minds. They became the chief authority in the country and set up courts and offices, dismantling the existing judicial system of the native people, they established white supremacy. They called the native's Gods as fake and tried to convert them to Christianity. They built churches, joined the neglected and marginalized people with them. It is visible in both the works that there are people on both sides, there are some native people who joined forces with the white men and some who were against them. The white men used force and violence against the one who disobeyed them. They were also afraid of the natives who were against them having the fear of being attacked anytime. The common thing is the white men but not the representation of the native people, their true image, they are represented as someone who might attack them, this may be true to a certain extent as the white men were capturing their lands and were trying to control them, anyone under such circumstances would fight for freedom and survival. But this is not the only picture which should be shown to the outer world, the real normal Africans are shown in *Things Fall Apart*.

Conclusion

Chinua Achebe has presented both sides of the African native people, the normal and harmonious side who works hard on his land lives peacefully with his clan and family, but also the other side a male dominated society who is ready to fight the invaders, unlike Joseph Conrad who has just portrayed a one side image of the African being the uncivilized attackers. The people in Africa live in communities, follow their Gods and ancestors, believe in spirits, pray to them, fear them. They work hard on their lands, sow and reap Yams while depending on the rains for a good harvest. They celebrate festivals to thank and receive blessings from their Gods and ancestors, they share and live in harmony. This is the true Africa and Achebe is the one who has brought out this image to the rest of the world, a beautiful and raw image.

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