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Against the Current: Heroic Endeavours of Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Mr Biswas in V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*: A Comparative Perspective

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Abstract:

The European Colonization, after subjugating its colonies, had completely undermined and overlooked the colonized subjects. The imperial atrocities worsened the condition of the colonized people and subdued their individuality. Their oppressive and dominating authorities effected the colonized 'others' physically, socially, psychologically and also paved way for a complete change in the dominated people's personalities. The consequences are palpable, as demonstrated by various post-colonial texts in which the protagonists continuously suffer identity crisis and seek their individuality in their colonized situations.

This paper attempts to trace the heroic endeavours of the protagonists of two different novels in their respective colonial settings. Both Okonkwo as well as Mohun Biswas strived to achieve and maintain their dignities in a colonial set-up till end. They remained steadfast against every challenge and conquered the ebbs and tides of life with perseverance. They refused every identity their situations tried to pressurize upon them and resisted the colonial forces to their best. Comparing and analysing the crusts and troughs of the lives of Okonkwo and Mr Biswas, the paper draws parallels between their personal struggles and the anti-colonial resistance they showed.

Keywords: Colonial setups, Heroic endeavours, Alienation, Identity crisis, Resistance, Struggle.

Introduction

'Things Fall Apart' is a widely acclaimed novel by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe which is seen as the archetypal modern African novel in English. Published in 1958, this

novel is a chronicle of pre-colonial life and culture of south-eastern part of Nigeria and the devastation that the arrival of Europeans, during late nineteenth century, had upon it. "Although 'Things Fall Apart' remains the most widely read African novel, the failure of its hero", says Patrick C. Nnoromele, "continues to generate haunting questions in the minds of some of its readers, especially among those who seem to identify with the hero's tragedy." (Nnoromele 146). The question which often puzzles readers is whether Okonkwo is a hero or simply a tragic character who fails himself and his tribe.

'A House for Mr Biswas' is a great achievement of V.S. Naipaul which brings forth the colonial situation in Trinidad in first half of twentieth century. The novel is a tragicomic, that tells the story of a man who struggles for his identity in an orthodox Hindu family which tries to undermine his individuality and frustrates him by the dogmatic ideologies its members possessed. Set in Trinidad around 1950 and published in 1961, it is an expatriated East Indian's struggle in striking its roots anew. It is generally regarded as heavily loaded with autobiographical traits of Naipaul. Naipaul, about A House for Mr. Biswas says that it was "very much my father's book. It was written out of his journalism and stories; out of his knowledge he had got from the way of looking MacGowen had trained him in. It was written out of his writing." (FTC 1984: XIII). The Hanuman house in the novel symbolizes absolute authority and autocracy and Mr Biswas' pursuit for his own house represents everyman's struggle for identity. Naipaul, while focusing on the personal life of the protagonist covers the ethnic and social life of a large community.

The Unbroken Protagonists

The son of lazy prodigal, who worked less and spent more and turned out to be a failure in his life, Okonkwo is a hardworking and brave man since his teens. He is well known for 'throwing Amalinze the Cat.' Amalinze was a great wrestler who had stood unbeaten throughout the nine villages. Okonwo is well adored and respected amongst his tribe for being strong and unbeaten. In his family of three wives and their children, he has an upper hand and a controlling nature. His wives' relationship with him is of fear and love mingled together:

Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it be the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. He therefore treated Ikemefuna [the boy that had been left under Okonkwo's

care] as he treated everybody else – with a heavy hand. But there was no doubt that he liked the boy. (TFA P27).

Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son, has stomached the fact that his father wants him to be a man. So, he acts, and often pretends to be one, to an extent that he would feign to like the stories of tribal wars and conquests to please his father while deep down he loves what he is compelled to call 'women's stories': the fantasies and romances.

Like Okonkwo, Mohan Biswas is also born to a poor man and begins his life in a family of superstitious people under inauspicious conditions where some Hindu pundit predicts that the boy is an ill omen for his family. The prophecy seems to be coming true when as a child Biswas is indirectly and inadvertently responsible for his father's demise which shatters the family apart. Later, even his mother gives up nurturing him and he becomes an accidental child driven by circumstances. In his job of sign painter for the Tulsi family, his compliment for a young girl's smile is interpreted by her family as a love letter and he surprisingly finds himself engaged, with no way of rescuing himself. Getting himself inadvertently entangled in a marriage and a large family of orthodox and gullible Hindus is the beginning point for the endeavours of Mr Biswas both for his hardships as well as to go against the tide.

Okonkwo resents his father's ways of living. He doesn't want to be a laughingstock for people. He is determined to be wealthy and becomes one. He has plenty of yams and works hard in his fields. He perceives insensitiveness and emotions to be 'womanish' and his dominating and controlling nature to be 'manly'. He is the leader of his community who not only decides what to do in matters of tribal affairs but also has his say in family matters of his clan too. He feels it necessary, at times, to show his rage at slight provocations. When he gets angry, he stammers which in turn intensifies his anger and he uses his hands:

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. ... Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another name for woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (TFA P.13)

Mr Biswas also resents the Tulsi family soon after he starts living with them. Not surprising that he feels lonely in the Hanuman house despite the house being crowded. His mocking at the members and criticising of their lives is a rebelliousness of the too old and ignorant Hindu culture. He instead projects his own way of living and raises his revolutionary and radical views over everything. He asserts his own individuality and wants his independence. He ridicules the Tulsi family members by rejecting their principles and by calling them with little names like gods, bulls, monkeys etc. "and what about the two gods? It ever strikes you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey god outside and two living ones inside. Eh monkey, bull, cow, hen. This place is a blasted zoo, man." (Naipaul 123). Biswas refutes the suggestion of Govind, one of the family members, to leave sign painting and become a driver for the Tulsi estate saying, "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe?" (Naipaul 107). This rebelling attitude and the nonconforming nature of Biswas makes him leave Hanuman house and wander from place to place. These trips are but less of adventurous and more of an outcast's struggle for survival. At last, he reaches the conclusion of having 'A House of his Own'. The 'house' thus becomes not only a matter of bricks and stones but for Biswas the house is a symbol of independence and stability. It depicts the expatriates' inner conflict of belonging nowhere and everywhere and the colonized people's struggle of self-determination and identity. Biswas leaves Hanuman house and seeks his own house so to find peace, spiritual shelter, stability and his own identity. Tulsidom forced its own rules and regulations upon him but he revolts and seeks his own independence. Mr Biswas represents everyman's struggle in pursuit of happiness and stability. The novel depicts a miniature world which represents the larger colonial world. Biswas' personal tussle with autocratic Tulsi clan is a remarkable quest for existential freedom of everyman. As Manjit Inder Singh remarks, "Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast's symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe". (Singh 126).

Nnoromele maintains:

Hero, in the Igbo cultural belief system, is one with great courage and strength to work against destabilizing forces of his community, someone who affects, in a special way, the destinies of others by pursuing his own. He is a man noted for special achievements. His life is defined by ambivalence, because his actions must stand in sharp contrast to ordinary behaviour. So a hero is not made in isolation; rather he is a product of the social matrix with in which he operates. The person's determination to

pursue his individual interest concomitantly with that of the society is a constant source of dynamic tensions because his obligations to his society can become an impediment to his individual quest for fame and reputation. However, this impediment must be overcome if he is to be a hero. Paradoxically, a hero becomes both the disrupting and integrating principles of the community. Okonkwo, the central character in *Things Fall Apart*, is the epitome of this complex concept and the personification of the cultural ambiguity of the Igbo people. (148).

The passion for being a hero for his tribe and his overall journey on the road to heroism has to be viewed in the context of Igbo culture. Okonkwo may be called a patriarch, a short tempered and even a failure. Critics have not remained back from calling Okonkwo an anti-hero. But these allegations do not find room when Okonkwo is seen through the lenses of his own culture and when his personal and regional conditions are taken into account. Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna is also justified since it was compensating the earlier loss that the clan had suffered because of the neighbouring village and since the oracle had decreed his killing, it had to be done. This was a kind of sacrifice in honour of their gods. Even then a sort of poetic justice happens when inadvertently Okonkwo's gun explodes in Ezeudu's funeral and "the dead man's sixteen-year-old son, who with his brothers and half-brothers had been dancing the traditional farewell to their father", gets shot. Okonkwo is banished from his clan along his family. Thereafter, he lives in his motherland; a little village called Mbaino where he is warmly welcomed. In Mbaino too Okonkwo continues labouring and soon attains his titles and wealth again. While he is away enduring his seven years of exile, his clan is worst effected in his absence. The European colonizers have not only settled in his fatherland but the missionaries have also won many converts, occupied large estates and build churches. Had Okonkwo been the leader, it would perhaps have been different thing altogether.

The Hanuman house in 'A House for Mr Biswas' is ruled by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who exploit their fellow Hindus as their slaves. The men are required as marriage partners to Tulsi daughters and to work at their estate. Mr Biswas is also supposed to do the same. To accept the rules laid down by Hanuman house is to give assent to one's slavery. He rebels against Tulsis and shuns everything they do. At first he tries convincing others like Govind about the fact that his struggle is actually their also and they should revolt against the Tulsis to get freedom from the slavery they are suffering from but later sets to his heroic journey all by himself against all odds. He faces great many challenges one after another but refuses to

kneel. Gordon Rohlehr argues, "Biswas is everyman wavering between identity and non-identity ... he is fully presented as a person whose very quick and idiosyncrasy we know in the world where every sight sound and smell recorded with fidelity and precision." (IA 137-38). The desire of having his own house entered him in Green Vale where he was sent by Mrs Tulsi and compelled to live with other workers in shared rooms. "As soon as he saw the barracks, Mr Biswas decided that the time had come for him to build his own house, by whatever means." (Naipaul 214) After leaving Green Vale, Biswas moves to Port of Spain where he gets a professional job in Sentinal. This new job of writing in Sentinal does not erase his feeling of alienation. The protagonists of all his stories reflect his own life, "The hero trapped into marriage, burdened with a family" (Naipaul 363). Though his stories begin with joy but, ". . . left him dissatisfied and feeling unclean." (Naipaul 363). The insecurity and longingness faced by Mr. Biswas seems to be a natural phenomenon with everyone in general in an alien land of colonized people.

The Foucauldian conception of discourse is apt in both the novels. Discourses are spread by someone who is at the helm of power and these have profound influence upon others. Mr Biswas's birth is thought to be 'inauspicious' for the family and he is considered an ill omen for he has 'an unlucky sneeze', 'a sixth digit' and 'good but wide teeth'. This discourse is spread by a Hindu pundit who is called at his birth. Mohun Biswas is called Mr Biswas since his childhood.

Similarly, after the white missionaries land in Umuofia, they start spreading discourses about the native blacks to be inferior. They call their gods false, denigrate their religion, mock at their customs and consequently ban their rituals. This creates a rift between the colonized and the colonizer. The colonizer wants the colonized to be his like but not his equal. The fear psychosis, the Europeans spread, paves way for their smooth functioning in Umuofia.

Mr Biswas is approached by a man who sells him a house. Biswas purchases the house but it later turns to be not fit for living in. Instead of giving up, he repairs and enhances its condition. He refuses to let himself down when the circumstances push him towards wall. He often acts like a buffoon and comically makes fun of himself and fools those who try to fool him. In a scene in *The Chase*, he shows how he doesn't feel like a little man and yet the clothes hanging where inappropriately those of 'small man'. He builds two houses of his own and spends lot of time in making them. When he runs short of money, he even does the

carpentry by himself. All his journeys and adventures seem to be driven more by his circumstances and less by him as the great poet Nida Fazili says:

“Apni marzi k kahan apne safar k hum hei / Rukh hawaun ka jidher ka hein udhar k hum hei”
(Not as per my wishes is my journey, I go / in whichever direction the blow of wind is).

But Biswas bravely goes against the winds and tides to ‘paddle his own canoe’. He succeeds in giving a comfortable life and providing a world full of opportunities for his children. Despite himself being a less educated man, he manages to send his son and daughter overseas for higher education. Later towards the end, though Biswas does not escape death, like every other human being, he leaves his family a house of his own to be all theirs. In the Prologue Naipaul writes:

How terrible would have been, at this time, to be without it: to have died among the Tulsis, amid the squalor of that large, disintegrating and indifferent family; to have left Shama and the children among them, in one room; worse, to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (Naipaul 8).

Okonkwo, when he returns back to his village, gets surprised at the fate of his clan. He is unable to comply by the status quo and wants his clan to unite and rebel. He wants the white man thrown at any cost. But to his dismay, he sees his clan withered and tattered. Obierika, in a conversation with Okonkwo, remarks:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (TFA 166).

After Okonkwo beholds one of the messengers, who asked him and his people to stop the meeting, he gets disappointed and broken when he sees his people watching quietly and not moving an inch. He realised his clan was no more what it used to be:

Okonkwo stood looking at the dead man. He knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discovered fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘why did he do it?’ He wiped his matchet on the sand and went away. (TFA.194).

As Ernest A.Champion comments:

He went away to kill himself, thereby committing an offence against the earth; a man who committed this offence will not be buried by his clansmen. 'His body was evil and only strangers may touch it' (p. 190). It is truly an ironic end, signifying the conflict of a man who stood inflexible, believing he was defending a heritage, while even his last act in defence of a system proves an abomination. The man who is the very embodiment of tradition has become the outcast of the tribe. (Champion 277).

The suicide is justified. In Nnoromele's words:

Okonkwo, who had a resolute hunger to become a hero, was not afraid of the forces that surrounded him. However, he was so overwhelmed by the cumulative effects of his experiences on the road to heroism that he felt the only thing left to do was to commit suicide. Okonkwo had to maintain his integrity as a hero. The truth of this profound, but ambivalent act is reflected in the Igbo proverb that says: 'The thought that led a man to truncate his own existence was not conceived in a day.' It was not just one single thing or event that forced Okonkwo to kill himself. His suicidal act was an ultimate expression of the compound effects of his own experiences in his unflinching desire to become a hero. Okonkwo was a hero. Hence, he had to depart from the battlefield as one. A hero would rather die than be captured and/or humiliated by the enemy. Okonkwo's death cheated his enemies, the European colonizers, of their revenge. But to the Umuofia people, it was unambiguously imprinted in their minds that there had been an irreversible break with the past. Umuofia would never again be what it was. (Nnoromele 155).

Concluding remarks

'Things fall Apart' and 'A House for Mr Biswas' are two remarkable postcolonial novels which chronicle the lives of two heroes who happen to be product of their respective environment and badly effected by their colonial situations. Both Okonkwo as well as Biswas meet death towards the end of the novels but leave a lasting effect on their people and their colonizers. They face every hardship and tackle every crisis and keep their heads high no matter how hard it becomes to survive. Though Okonkwo undergoes a single displacement throughout the story, Biswas travels many places in making his dream come true. The texts successfully portray fate of colonized people under European colonial power.

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