

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

June 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- III

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Re-Presenting the History of the Margin: *Things Fall Apart*

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*“All servants imported and brought into the Country... who were not Christians in their native Country... shall be accounted and be slaves. All Negro, mulatto and Indian slaves within this dominion... shall be held to be real estate. If any slave resist his master... correcting such slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction... the master shall be free of all punishment... as if such accident never happened.”*¹

Taken from the colonial archives, this anecdote clearly shows the self-righteous representation of the white Anglo Saxon society in all acts of cruelty towards the black people they have captured in their indigenous country and enslaved them in British and American colonies. Written by the center, these colonial documents reflect only the discoursed side of the truth and taking no account of what the enslaved people might have felt or experienced during the course of events. In this respect, New Historicism steps in as the history and literature generally focus on what is represented by the authority, in other words the center, totally ignoring the peripheral accounts and the proof on what may actually have happened in history. Thus, shedding light on the perspective of the repressed and the periphery as a reaction to the documents penned by the center, *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe draws quite a lot of attention as a postcolonial novel. Narrating the tragedy of a black tribe through a black man's eyes, the novel brings about an alternate truth against that of the canonised archives of the past. Putting Okonkwo, an honourable man in Ibo tribe, into the center of his text, Achebe plays the role of an anti-historian and re-presents the Orient to the Occident. Having experienced the colonial process himself, Achebe shares his own accounts through narration, therefore pushing the reader to analyse his text within its historical context, but from a fresh new perspective, which is New Historicism (Veezer 1989: 34).

Centering around the tribe man Okonkwo's firsthand experiences, *Things Fall Apart*² accounts for the colonial activities taking place in Nigeria. But before moving onto the imperial actions sizzling both Okonkwo's family and his tribe, the peaceful atmosphere of the wild tribes of Nigeria are placed at the beginning of the narration. Starting with the war between two tribes and Okonkwo's glorious victory, the daily life of Ibo tribe is depicted thoroughly. He wins a boy, Ikemefuna, as the price of his victory and brings him home (Achebe 1971: 12, 13, 14). As the boy becomes a part of Okonkwo's family, three years pass and the tribal life is led by all members committing themselves to the rituals and their natural gods. From Achebe's perspective, these tribal people have their good and bad qualities and some problems, just like every other individual has. Okonkwo is described as a tough guy, one of the strongest men of the Ibo tribe and a strict husband as well as father. He shows no emotion to the people around him, his wives and children, let alone Ikemefuna, to whom he grows more attached each day. He is appreciated by both the elderly and the young of his tribe for his bravery and manly attitudes. Meanwhile the tribe continues their normal life by marriage rituals, showing their gratitude to nature for providing them with nourishment,

¹ Excerpt from the Virginia Slave Code of 1705.

² Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers New Windmill Series, 1971.

getting terrified by the Evil Forest, feeling overjoyous at the sight of locusts and other wild or rather “savage” incidents, as so named by the “white” discourse (49). Yet, they are not a group of people gathered around a loose system, indeed they have a highly moral, strict and hierarchical social system, similar to that of the western countries. When Okonkwo beats his wife during the Week of Peace for coming home late, the tribe punishes him and avoids talking to him, which makes him regret for his behaviour later (26, 27). According to the west, they might look savage and act like wildlings in their behaviours and the ancient rituals they cherish, but there is certainly harmony, peace and “concord out of discord” in their lives, which is rarely observed in the western civilisations. Afterwards, being the mouthpiece of a pagan religion “in western language”, the oracle of the tribe warns Okonkwo that the boy Ikemefuna should be killed, though not through Okonkwo’s involvement. So the boy is killed eventually, leaving Okonkwo in grief, although he gives no hint of it even to his beloved daughter Ezinma, for he is the leader of his house (58, 59). Then for the first time in the novel, a tribesman, Obierika, talks about the white people with chalky skin and no toes. He makes fun of them by referring to a white man passing through the village and equates white men to lepers, without sensing the real danger they pose to his tribe (64, 65). After mentioning of this encounter, on the *uri* day, which is a celebration arranged by tribesmen for welcoming suitors for their daughters, Okonkwo kills someone accidentally (97). Therefore, he is sent to exile with his family for seven years, as a punishment the tribe system puts into force. After that point, the real encounter with white men takes place as Okonkwo brings his family to Mbanta, his mother’s village (113-4). After two years of exile, Okonkwo meets his friend Obierika, who tells him about a white man visiting their clan. He finds the way the white man talks really strange. The oracle of his clan warns the tribe against the destruction white men shall bring, referring to the technological devices they use (120, 123). However, before the tribesmen realise what is happening to them, the white men have already settled in their land and converted countless indigenous people into Christianity. There are a lot of mimic men imitating the coloniser by making a pathetic show through their funny clothes and behaviours. Okonkwo and Obierika discuss the great danger they are in and they put the blame on themselves as well as the coloniser for being so naive as to let the white men among themselves so easily (154-155). This is the crucial part of the novel as they confess they have lost their brothers to the coloniser. The coloniser has first introduced their religion, then built roads and separated villages from one another and lastly they began to govern the tribes. This is the way the colonisation process takes place. Now the tribe is no longer a whole, brothers has turned hostile towards each other. There are mimic men and women, also spies among the indigenous who covertly influence and persuade other tribe members into slavery. The tribe gradually shatters and things fall apart. It is too late to take everything back that the white men has stolen from them and the number of the rebels among the tribe is not enough to destroy the coloniser (156). Still, Okonkwo and a few men fight against the coloniser ignoring the consequences, because there is no other way they can go on living. With Mr. Smith’s arrival into the village, things get out of control and people are murdered as he forces the tribesmen into Christianity and slavery instead of trying to persuade them. It is the scene when the few numbers of proletariat including Okonkwo resist against the powerful coloniser (162-164). A war takes place between the colonised and the coloniser during which Okonkwo beheads the messenger of the coloniser and ends in prison along with his friends for the crime he has committed. They spend some time locked inside and meanwhile the white men take possession of everybody and everything in their land. There is nothing left for Okonkwo the honourable man but to kill himself before the coloniser does. The novel ends tragically when the white men come across Okonkwo’s dead body (183).

The main motive behind Achebe’s novel is to reflect the suffering of the African people along with other indigenous communities at the hands of the British imperialism.

Being a Nigerian himself, Achebe perfectly describes what the colonised feels and what great destruction is brought upon the once blissful native lands as a result of the coloniser's economical and political interests upon the area. The novel exquisitely pictures the cruel achievement of the British coloniser in the Nigerian lands by cunning "divide and rule" policy and how the once closely-knit harmonious structure of the indigenous community falls apart in a pretty short period. Rewriting the history, Achebe indeed writes back to the empire from his postcolonial position and opens discussion for New Historicist arguments. Likewise, Stephen Greenblatt makes a similar postcolonial remark in his *Shakespearean Negotiations* as that a Renaissance author named Harriot decides to write about the natives by observing them in their natural surrounding. As he narrates his adventures, he tells how the British colonisers trick the indigenous people by persuading them that they should cooperate with the white men and obey them, otherwise their crops will fade away and they shall die of hunger. Terrifying some of them and earning their trust, the white men want more and more and try dishonourable plans to push the natives into obedience. They plant an illness among the tribes and the natives start to fall in numbers, suffering. Then on, the white coloniser tells them that it is the God's wrath because the tribe did not respect and obey the white men. So, God sent them this illness like invisible bullets to take the revenge of the white men. Eventually, this tricky incident puts an end to the indigenous rebellion and drives them into mindless slavery. This is what Harriot recites in his text named ironically as "A Brief and True Report" (Greenblatt 1988: 28-31). As clearly deduced, the British coloniser always uses brutal force on the naive indigenous people to lure them into obedience and slavery. Acting by profitable interests, hence creating and controlling markets abroad for Western goods and securing the natural resources as well as labour force of those lands at the lowest possible price, the coloniser obviously has more important matters to settle than worrying about the natives' situation. Indeed they decide it would be the greatest favour they could make to the indigenous people to civilise them, pretending they have had no history, culture, language and so forth (McLeod 2000: 19). Treating the indigenous people like tabula rasa and scrubbing whatever is left from their previous lives, the British coloniser imposes his own history, language and culture into the emptied minds. The tribe people are so much exploited and maltreated that after a few generations they cannot speak their own language, let alone accounting their own history. They witness unspeakable repression for years and they grow deaf to their own nationality only until the 1980s. In 1978, the French writer Frantz Fanon participates in the newly emerging postcolonial movement by supporting the Algerian rebellion against French colonialism, writing *The Wretched of The Earth* and introducing such terms as "negritude" and "native intellectual" into the postcolonial glossary (Ibid 84). However it is in the 1880s that Edward Said points out the real problem in his *Orientalism*. This is probably the beginning of what is known as postcolonialism today and marking a departure from the milder Commonwealth literature of the previous decades. He represents the east through the easterner's eyes and shatters the stereotypes and clichés about eastern people (Ibid 40, 47). So he creates an anti-history against the canonical and monolithic history through challenging alternatives.

In this respect, Louis Montrose explains the historiography, in other words history writing, process in his book. "*By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of writing- including not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them: thus, I also mean to suggest the historical, social, and material embedding of all modes of writing. By the textuality of histories, I mean to suggest, in the first place, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to a lived material existence that is unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question, and, furthermore, that the survival of those traces rather than others cannot be assumed to be merely fortuitous but must rather be presumed to be at least*

partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of selective preservation and effacement." He further states that there are no fixed meanings of texts. Yet, reading and writing have always been historically manipulated and turned into authentic, monolithic and universal facts (1996: Prologue 6, 7). Therefore, Achebe's novel serves as a piece of history by simply being a text and exposing an ignored, rather unheard side of the so called "historical truth" as a production of the postcolonial discourse. Because the New Historicists complain of the limitation of traditional historical approaches, thus, canonical pieces of writings, they cherish all kinds of writing regardless of the field. It is enough that the work gives voice to the periphery like *Things Fall Apart* does, which is centered around the tragical story of a Nigerian tribe (Pieters 2001:144). Paying attention to the individual voice rather than the collective, New Historicism becomes a history of possibilities, as in Okonkwo's representation of the African people, in response to the Western literature and history (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2001: 16). Proving to be the mouthpiece of the suppressed and the exploited, *Things Fall Apart* performs to be a perfect example adding up another history to the alternative histories that seem to emerge since 1980s. As a peripheral work, it is also a mirror to comprehend the center because it exemplifies the contrast of the Western narratives and ideologies.

In sum, named as a postcolonial novel written by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* naturally becomes the case study of different branches of literary criticism including New Historicism. Giving detailed information on the ignored culture of an indigenous tribe of Nigeria, the Ibos, Achebe aims to present his own people as they are, in contrast with the West-oriented narrations. Making Okonkwo the protagonist of his story with all goods and vices he embodies, he proves Okonkwo is only a normal humanbeing who has weak and strong sides and who cannot bear to live under enslaving system of colonisation without liberty. Therefore, he succeeds awakening some sympathy and understanding for the oppressed slaves of the colonial period. The reader comes to like him as he pursues his tribal life and feels pity for him when he is sentenced to exile for seven years, leaving his hometown behind. In the end, the tragic end of the novel seizes the reader's heart when he perishes at the hands of the vicious coloniser, far away from his hometown. Okonkwo's voice attracts the attention of the western readers as well as the eastern ones for the humane and pitiful experiences he has been through. He stands before the coloniser alone and although it is a sin in his religion, he decides to take his own life, seeing no end for himself in the colonial life. The novel surges catharsis in the reader at this tragic end, but along with that, Okonkwo becomes the heroic figure representing the indigenous communities and the strong, willful resistance against all kinds of usurpers. So, his end creates a legendary character and his death narrated by Achebe hovers over the western countries like a ghost and the constant reminder of their shameful past. This is the crucial message Achebe gives to the west and it is their conscience that he truly addresses. Consequently, Achebe succeeds in his goal by bringing out an alternative history to the countless previous texts and archives and forming the base for New Historicist analysis as the narrative of *the other*.

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