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CULTURAL CONFLICT IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

The African people followed a different lifestyle. They varied in their behaviour beliefs, thoughts, interaction with people, mannerism and most importantly in following their culture. The clash between the African culture and the Western culture is majorly seen as a clash between the traditional and the Western. What was the nature of the Nigerian nation after colonialism? The change of a person and the fall of culture occurred due to colonialism. The fall of culture due to westernization are portrayed in attention to issues of actions, behaviours and statements of characters and cultural realism. Hence leading to a conclusion, cultural clashes laid the path for the western ones. It also intends to indicate the extent of the damage in the relationship between Africans and their natural world caused by the event of colonization.

Key words – African culture, Colonialism, Westernization, the fall of culture and the fall of man.

INTRODUCTION

The study x-rays the cultural and social reality visible and permissible in Igbo land of Nigeria before and after the coming of the white men as reflected in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe along with many other writers like Wole Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri, Ama Ata Aidoo and others had used literature as a medium to express their desires for a reawakening of a society that has lost its values and even its own identity. Gikandi states that Achebe's works and thoughts always stir many forgotten questions - where, when and why does colonialism begin to seize the initiative in the organisation of the African society (*Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*).

Obierika and Okonkwo discuss how the white man successfully brought down the tribal civilization.

"...The white men is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We are amused at the foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won brothers and like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe 160).

Things were not the same, as the old way has been outdated and required to be updated. When threatened by the new ways of the colonizer, the tribe succumbed to their threat. They emphasised their power due to

the strong white government in the background. They punished the natives severely for any offense levelled against the white man. They attacked the natives emotionally by building schools and hospitals, to make them unwilling to go for war against the ones who have brought these much needed benefits for them for the first time. Not only were the natives colonized but was their minds that were colonized too. This is evident when Okonkwo receives no response for lone cry of war against the colonizers.

The British government may break him, but can never bend him. Okonkwo is a spokesman of his culture and its values. 'Things Fall Apart' means disruption and disarrangement of an age old system by external or internal forces. The knife of British administration supporting the cause of missionary campaign fell on the culture of happily living Igbo people and cut it to bleed and die. As Gicaamba in 'I'll Marry When I Want' notes that

"All the missionaries of all the churches
Held the Bible in the left hand,
And the gun in the right hand,
The white man wanted us to be drunk with religion"
While he,
In the meantime,
Was mapping and grabbing our land
And starting factories and businesses
On our sweat.
(Ngugi 56-57).

People led a happy life without bitterness of any serious kind. They were contented with what they had. They live in co-operation with one another. Okonkwo's stayed at his uncle's place due to his years of exile. He had full co-operation for his family. They gave him land for farming and building his huts. And his cousins gave him yam seeds for sowing. He was consoled by Uchendu, his uncle saying "Mother is Supreme" and she was always there to provide him with relief and shelter. Okonkwo's friend Obeirika was a faithful and loving friend of him. He took care of Okonkwo's farms at Umofia for the seven years while he was at exile. After every harvest he took the proceedings to Mbanta thereof to his friend. Unoka, Okonkwo's father was an idle man. His only aim was to eat, drink and be merry. He borrowed money from people who lent him out of pity with the presumption that he would not return their money. Okonkwo worked very hard not to be like his father, and thus was the result of being very famous and earning many titles and famous among the nine villages.

The major occupation of the people was farming. They worked very hard from morning till the evening. They were happy and led a content living and were unaware of what was happening around them and in the African continent. They used the old methods in farming and were not aware of the advanced techniques. They were only aware of hoe culture. They had enough for their needs. They were hospitable and respectful to elders. They served kola-nuts and palm wine to their guests.

They followed various rituals and their festivals were very unique. Their festivals were 'A week of Peace' and 'The new yam festival'. These festivals were celebrated as a village. Celebrating their festivals together, it provided them with opportunity of drinking, eating and having fun together. This led to a way of developing closeness among themselves Uchendu says "A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starvation, we came together because it is good for the kinsmen to do so". This was told by him because the young men of the village never knew how strong the bond of kinship was and what it was to speak in one voice.

The Igbo village was famous for the sport, wrestling. They loved watching wrestling matches. They enjoyed dancing to the beats and rejoiced in the victory of their favourite wrestlers. Their simple joys were telling funny stories to their children, gossiping under the silvery light of the moon, taking delight in music, playing and composing new poems.

They were even happy with their political life. They had a council of elders consisting of nine greatmen of clans to decide all the political issues in a democratic way. They had no leader or a government to

rule them. Criminals were punished under the decisions taken by the elders guided by the traditional laws of the clan.

Religion had a great impact on their lives. They believed in the supremacy of one God called Chukwu. They believed in many gods and goddess, oracles, evil spirits, medicine man, magic, etc. They were happy with their religious rituals inspite of some evil practices like banning of burial by the clansmen of the dead bodies of the men who happened to commit suicide even for a great cause (like Okonkwo), throwing of infant twins into the evil forest, killing of innocent boy like Ikemefuna for someone's fault, throwing of the people suffering from the disease into the evil forest to rot and die. When Okonkwo commits suicide his friend Oberieka says 'We cannot bury him, only strangers can do it... and now he will be buried like a dog'.

People lived a happy life until the external forces stepped to their village to destroy their happiness and to create havoc. They appeared in the name of missionaries. They built churches in different villages, preached the gospel and attracted the innocent people of the village towards them. Day by day many people were converting to Christianity. The white men was thus successful in his attempt of dividing the people among themselves. Which led to disputes among themselves and disturbed their peace of living. Where Oberieka also remarks "Our own men and sons have joined the ranks of the strangers. They have joined his religion and the help to uphold heir government". "How do you think we can fight when our brothers have turned against us". Mr. Smith was very strict. He was racist and treated them as blacks and whites. He called the Igbo people the Sons of Darkness, he believed in slaying prophets of the village. He criticised Mr. Brown who served according to his conscience and who was loved by the villagers.

Even though so much had happened the English men had failed to destroy the Igbo culture. Slowly the process of disintegration began when they set up courts of justice, prisons, government and trade for commerce. They threatened and started to rule the natives with a head hand. People who did not abide to the rules were thrown behind bars even though they were elders or members of the council. They lost their values and had no courage to face the challenge exposed to them.

"Does the white man understand our customs about land? How can he judge us when he does not even speak our tongue" (Achebe 176). Language was a main aspect of their identity. Through language one understands our culture and beliefs of another. If one does not understand the language of another result in a division in understanding that would impinge on legal, religious and cultural appreciation. Along with the Europeans came new laws and religion. Thus there arouse a cultural conflict.

A cultural division that separated two cultures lead to disputes among people. What was correct for one group was harsh and unacceptable by another. Though the tribal laws were termed harsh, the European laws were in no way better. Both the groups totally differed in their religious practises. In Africa, one has to make sacrifices of animals (sometimes humans) as circumstances vary. While the Europeans do not need to shed any blood especially as Jesus Christ has already shed his blood on the Cross of Calvary. This shedding of Blood of Christ was not believed by the Igbo people. Igbo men can marry as many women, for it was considered a pride. But in European context polygamy is frowned at. Both cultures have their individual faults, due to these faults troubles arouse.

Greatest faults were sacrifice, which according to the Igbo people meant clan cleansing. The young and innocent by Ikemefuna is sacrificed by the clan to appease the gods of the land. Though Okonkwo knew it was beyond his love for Ikemefuna but he kills him for the benefit of his people, whereas the English men were against animal or human sacrifices. The English men came to know about such stories and they were determined to make "good Christians" out of the native "barbaric Africans". The Westernisation and Christianity had domination over the Traditional Culture and Religion. Okonkwo expresses his anger, assertiveness and violence for his first son Nwoye when he joins the missionaries and it is this humiliation, that makes Okonkwo attack Nwoye and he eventually disowns his son. Thus there appears a cultural clash. Then Nwoye decided to go to Umofia, to enrol himself in school to read and write. This act of rebellion marks a cultural clash between traditional and western masculinities.

In their village they usually stick together irrespective of the issues or circumstances (in case of farming or hunting), but here Nwoye goes away from his home to Umofia against the dictates of the father.

For the Africans, going to school was a waste of the time for boys rather to be on the farms or doing more serious things. For Okonkwo he sees this act as cowardice and something abominable.

“to abandon the gods of one’s father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination (Achebe 108)”. More than the fear of losing his son he had the fear of losing his entire household to the new religion.

With the coming of the westernisation, many cultural beliefs of the clan were being openly antagonised, defied and eroded. The European imperialists colonised the African, Asian and many other countries by following a set pattern. They introduced their religion through missionaries, they assumed their culture, scientific progress, philosophy and even civilization. They tempted people with various steps and tried to convert them to their will and thus succeeded to. After attaining a supreme hand over the people, they started imposing taxes, exploiting people, etc. Abiola Irele comments on the cultural clash in his debut novel as: “The immediate subject of Chinua Achebe’s novels is the tragic consequences of the African encounter with the Europe...”

The glory of the Igbo village was such that it was untouched by any other external influence. The cultural clash also emphasises how the more technologically advanced invaded and exploited the weaker under false pretences. They attacked the natives not a frontal one for they knew they couldn’t succeed. They built schools and hospitals in Umofia. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied. (Things Fall Apart 132). Brian Shaffer rightfully criticises this role of missionaries in Igbo as: Things Fall Apart reveals the great extent to which religious missionaries were part of the comprehensive strategy of colonization, in which the church functioned as a beachhead for politics and economic imperialism... “imagined process of ‘civilization’ that the British believed they were giving to savages”. It created cultural disintegration and social chaos and broke down the Igbo society.

They also started trade centres along with schools and churches. They opened various trade centres, they paid prize for the villagers in the form of money. They made a firm stand in the centre with this method. Then they started governing the people. They not only brought churches, but also a government with them. They built courts and the innocent villages were brought to trial. ‘For a Enoch unmasking an Egwugwu they destroyed the church of Umofia, which was a great blow to the white men. They in turn arrested the villagers and tortured them. They were released only after paying a heavy fine.

The cultural clash applied in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart unravels the cultural politics of the White men in Nigeria. It reveals their evangelical disguise and unmask their imperialist face hiding behind it. It highlights the disintegration by the rich and varied culture of the Igbo village with the coming of the colonizers. The villagers almost caught between resisting and embracing change. Many villagers were very much excited about the new advances brought by the Englishmen. This new advancement quenched the needs of the change in traditional methods, which totally altered their lifestyle – farming, cooking, construction of houses, etc. They were given education too. They were taught and forced to learn English which made them forget their mother tongue as it suppressed not only the people but also their tradition and culture. Chinua Achebe portrays the western in Things Fall Apart as “arrogant and ethnocentric’.

Language, the mode and primary source for communication also results to cultural clash. Achebe even uses many of the Igbo words in the text because to bring in the rear effect and feel of the African people’s experience to the readers, whereas the Igbo language was too complex for translating. It could never be understood under the European framework. The cultural conflict rose from the misunderstanding between two different cultures. The Englishmen considered themselves to be far more superior than the whites. Change in the culture happened in the economic, social and political organisation of society. More of the coming in the change in their culture they forgot their traditional values. They started following the European habits which led to the destruction. The missionaries came with their bibles but their objective was to destroy the force that held the tribal society in existence for centuries.

In a 1996 interview, Achebe said “Belief in either radicalism or orthodoxy is too simplified a way of viewing things...Evil is never all evil; goodness on the other hand is often tainted with selfishness”. Africa is

considered as the dark continent which needs some light to get rid of superstitions as it was understood wrong under the colonial power. Whereas Okonkwo was also distressed by the social changes these white men brought in. His position, with an upper hand was now at risk. The Europeans portrayed the Africans as savages, they considered it was their duty to enlighten the blacks. Thus the natives paid a high price of losing their customs and traditions as their society was replaced with new values and the conflict between two cultures lead to chaos which alienated them from their own continent itself.

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