

RELINQUISHING COLONIAL BELIEFS AND RESTORING AFRICANS: A CRITICAL READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract

This paper investigates Achebe's mapping of the African historical and cultural topography in a way which draws significant impact on the decolonization process and the transformative role of *Things Fall Apart* in the evolution of African literature from its position of marginality. This is done because Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* offers an important paradigm alternative perception of the African and yields the foundational premise upon which African cultural nationalism and literary discourse have been built. Viewed from the postcolonial lens, the work shows that the novel has remained a critical text in the interrogation of long held perceptions of the African; especially as projected in such texts as Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Indeed, Achebe proceeds in the process of negotiating and constructing the identity of the African image through a deliberate and sustained projection of those distinct values that define the African essence. The conclusion is that *Things Fall Apart* effectively appropriates colonial language in its delineation of African culture and history; and engages in the process of re-imagining of the African by undermining the colonial conceptualizations of the African.

Key words: Perception, Re-imagining, Restoration, Post Colonialism.

Introduction

In many different ways, literature has the power to define and place an entire people and their humanity within a context of social and political relevance such that a near holistic understanding of the people's history can be easily apprehended. Most of the literature on and about Africa has been that which had been written by western

anthropologists, adventurers and explorers who had a preconceived image and perception of Africa and its people. It is in this context that the views and opinions of these earliest European adventurers in Africa helped in shaping the very nature of European critical thinking about Africa and thus defined the impressions held of the African. The paper is therefore concerned about 'restoring' as it were, the image of the African that suffered the colonial perception and marginalisation. The text thus cuts through the inglorious perception of the African and intervenes in representing an alternative image of the African in the full exploit of his culture and tradition. In essence, *Things Fall Apart* represents the definition of Africa in its full cultural context. According to C.L. Innes: "*Things Fall Apart* is a celebration of a novelist of a warrior, Okonkwo, and of the pre-Christian culture he strove to preserve. ...it is an attempt to recreate and redefine a way of life, its language and its modes of thought and perception, in the language and form of the colonizing culture" (1).

Chinua Achebe argues that there were certain desires and utterances "in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil in Europe, a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest" (2). It is in this context that the concept of re-imagining of the African identity becomes significant in the sense of Achebe's reconstruction of the battered image of the African through the portrayal of those values and norms that define African cultural and traditional topography. In other words, *Things Fall Apart* is a bold effort at correcting and re-imagining the distortions.

Philip Darby argues that "it was the Europeans who introduced the politics of difference and thereby provided an impulse for Africans to present their world in shades of otherness" (3). This is why *Mister Johnson* by Joyce Cary becomes Achebe's initial reference point. Pursuing this argument further, Achebe places Conrad within this category as according to him, "*Heart of Darkness* projects the image of Africa as the 'the other world', the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where a man's vaunted intelligence and

refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality” (2). Instances of such definitions and notions about the African were major motifs in the works of many European scholars. Before the emergence *Things Fall Apart*, western literature that dealt with Africa was constructing Africans in uncomplimentary terms. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, and in the works of Elspeth Huxley, Henry Rider Haggard and others are particular examples of texts that did not only question but failed to recognize the humanity in the African.

Data Analysis

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe succeeds in demonstrating that there were civilizations throughout the African continent organized on their own terms, which while not perfect, were not remotely savage or inhuman. He used *Things Fall Apart* as an opportunity to recast both the image of Africa and Africans in a much more balanced or realistic way. In the words of Ali Mazrui, “*Things Fall Apart* is a view from within—both ethnically and racially. ...it is a work of ethnic candour and honesty” (4). Creating a sense of balance in the representation of the African cultural dynamics and landscape is significant in its postcolonial ramifications. To Chimamanda Adichie,

Things Fall Apart is the African novel most read—and arguably most loved—by Africans, a novel published when 'African novel' meant European accounts of 'native' life. Achebe was an unapologetic member of the generation of African writers who were 'writing back,' challenging the stock of Western images of their homeland, but his work was not burdened by its intent (5).

It is in this vein that *Things Fall Apart* portrays a society in its full contours and colours; a society experiencing its own tensions and readjusting to accommodate new reality. With characters like Okonkwo, these tensions become palpable as they become emblematic of the struggle to negotiate an understanding of the new reality.

The portrayal of the African as an interesting object of anthropological colonial gaze and a cynical tourism industry has been the major determinant in the emergence of Achebe's *Things fall Apart*. In no uncertain terms, the novel has provided the leadership for contemporary African novels to challenge these colonial impressions, and attempting to reinstate those traditional values that are the core of African cult and Lifestyle and tradition. Ferdinand Oyono in *Houseboy*, perhaps drawing from Achebe's example, unmasks the hypocrisy of the colonialists especially the impression that fuels the condescending attitude towards the African, the native and the primitive; a situation that encourages the further dehumanisation of the African as seen in the ways in which Toundi, the houseboy, is treated. His treatment in the hands of the colonialists is a reflection of what Africans suffered in the hands of European colonialists. This treatment is echoed in the terse but pungent question, "what are we black men who are called French?" (6)

Things Fall Apart provides not only a philosophical reconstruction of colonialist inventions of Africa but also, enunciates an evocative essence in its ontological implication of interdisciplinary analysis as the narrative draws from the rich cadence of Africa's cultural history. As a prototypical text, *Things Fall Apart* depicts the disruption of traditional order of life expressed in the tension and conflicts occasioned by colonialist politics. The text explores the changes and reorganization of the social order. We therefore aim to establish a cross-disciplinary forum in which to discuss the evidential and cultural significance of orality and its deployment in the text. The text demonstrates a bold and lucid exploration of the invasion of a people and a community by the colonialists. There is a high and palpable feeling of failure, which is drawn in bold relief by the tragedy of Okonkwo the symbol and representative of the Umuofia communal value whose tragic end encapsulates the collective tragedy of the Umuofia community. In this context *Things Fall Apart* is as passionate as it is captivating in its representation of the sentiments of the people

whose culture and tradition are experiencing systemic and fundamental assaults.

It is significant that African literature emerged as a broad field that was driven by the concern to reinstate the dignity of the African that had been bruised by the forces of imperial colonialist intrusion bent on 'civilizing' the 'natives'; inspired by Europe's own messianic quest. However, Africanist scholars like Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) and Chinweizu in *The West and the Rest of Us* (1975) have advanced compellingly convincing arguments on Europe's driving motivation for the political and cultural subjugation of Africa purely on economic considerations. In order to achieve this, there was a systemic flow of both cultural and economic hegemonic tendencies that perpetuated the colonial domination that pushed the African to a marginal point of reference and thus created a crisis of self for the benefit of the European in his imperialist expansionist quest. However, the colonised eventually pushed through the alienating processes to find his own voice and chart his own path to define his own identity, and in the words of Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, "marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy" (7). It is in this context that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* provides a ground breaking metaphor of a 'carrier' of the African collective essence. Accordingly, to Adebayo Williams, Achebe is "arguably Africa's most influential and most admired writer of the postcolonial epoch..." (8). Achebe himself makes the point that *Things Fall Apart* is a response to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, "...it was an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son". He goes on to argue that:

Through a combination of fate and critical insertion in the postcolonial process, the young novelist found himself saddled with the task of excavating the colonial debris, detoxifying the lingering efficacy of its ideological apparatuses, and laying the foundation for an authentically African literary experience (2)

This response from Achebe is indicative of the consciousness of some early African writers who provided counter narratives to western assumptions and perceptions. Achebe, thus, provides a cultural narrative that signifies a contestation of the western historiographical beliefs about African history and its culture. Drawing from African oral and traditional story telling motifs and concepts, a holistic picture of African socio-cultural and trade-historical landscape is drawn. This representation does not appear only as a narrative but in its evocativeness and resonance of life and existence bound up in a unified existence of spirits, deities and gods.

In *Things Fall Apart*, there is an encapsulation of the many dimensions of the African cultural topography which, quite often, has remained a complex phenomenon for many European writers. Consequently, there have been misinterpretations, misrepresentations and confusions that have largely characterized even the contexts of some European narratives on Africa. Thus, characters and motifs are irreverently constructed such that they fit into predetermined notions of what should be African. In this regard, it is highly improbable to see characters that appear rational in thought and conception, or capable of engaging in issues of virtue or high moral stake; Characters often appear in stereotypical and representational forms as indolent, lazy, child-like, uncontrollable; often, incapable of engaging in any productive venture In this institutional representation, the key issue has been to define the African in a one dimensional frame of scorn or pity such that an ideological justification is provided for the eventual colonization and expropriation of the African continent.

There is the engagement with the assumed reality which had been created by the Hegelian philosophy and Darwinian concepts of history and racial evolution which primed Africa as a subject of inquiry and a project that became the responsibility of Europe to salvage and nurture to civilization and modernity. The subjectification of the African for the political and economic expansion of Europe manifested itself in the deliberate undermining of both cultural and political institutions that define the nexus and essential values of the African. In Achebe, therefore, there is the manifestation of the African essence

defined through such traditional institutions as gods, priests, festivals, rites and rituals which embody the entire African cosmology. Through the intrusion of western values, structural and fundamental changes ruptured the African cultural milieu and 'things fell apart'. Achebe's titled work draws allusion from the Yeats' pessimistic poem of 1920 titled "The Second Coming" to show the changes and the chaos that has been unleashed on the world. The compelling nature of Yeats' poem offers a glimpse into an impending future catastrophe for humanity.

Thus, *Things Fall Apart* is not just the story of an isolated Igbo society but offers itself to the metaphor of an expansive African cultural space. It depicts a society embroiled in its own internal tensions and contradictions but also capable of negotiating these problems. The text essentially offers a fundamental challenge to the European notions of seeing Africa only through the lenses of racial illusions. As Palmer succinctly puts it,

Things Fall Apart was a magnificent and much needed exercise in cultural and historical reclamation. Fully rising to all the demands of his role as both novelist and teacher, Achebe sought to teach, not only Europeans and the West in general, but also Africans who lacked knowledge of their history, of the grandeur, dignity, majesty and order of traditional African life. (2)

Palmer's viewpoint to the significant role and position that *Thing Fall Apart* has come to occupy as a major aesthetic instrument of cultural and political nationalism.

As James Snead argues:

Achebe's novels do not merely insinuate the unaware reader into a foreign and putatively inferior consciousness; they suggest a natural and indeed an actual place for African cultures alongside or even admixed with European ones. The presence of 'anthropological' detail in Achebe might present verisimilitude for a reader fluent in Ibo customs, but for a European reader, it constitutes a veritable declaration of war on the practice of dividing cultures and fictions into strict national groupings.

Snead's view undoubtedly reinforces the argument that Achebe deliberately subverts the misconception of the European of the African trado-cultural space. He does this by inscribing and fusing into his narrative essentially African narrative motifs that add candour to the texture of the conversations in the text. Indeed, James Snead further argues that "...Achebe's novels provide an unexpectedly tricky reading experience for their western audience, using wily narrative stratagems to undermine national and racial illusions" (9). There is therefore the ways in which European assumptions are contested and deconstructed through a deliberate narrative stratagem that draws from, and embodies an (Igbo) African cultural essence and reality. In this regard, Snead argues that Achebe uses indigenous Igbo words in sentences without translating such:

He (Unoka) could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the ekwe and the ulu and the ogene, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune. (9)

The refusal to translate some of the Igbo words by Achebe is deliberate and simply intended to highlight a cultural narrative that re-inscribes the African essence and spirit which had been subverted by European historiographers and anthropologists. Arguing further, Snead opines that:

By borrowing his title from Yeasts' pessimistically cyclical poem, "The Second Coming", Achebe similarly rewrites the test both of European historicism and of the cyclical view that was its hopeful antidote. If for Yeasts (as for Spengler and other modernist philosophers of history), the transition from barbarism (or paganism) to the Christian era would be followed by an unknown, presumably negative circle, in which 'things fall apart', Achebe reverses this view to highlight the negative impact that this hypothetically 'positive' Christian phase has already had upon the 'falling apart' of African culture. (2)

The implications of 'things fall apart'; in the third stanza of 'The Second Coming' which might at the first glance appear as an insignificant threat of sentence, is further deepened by the following, 'the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' In these phrases therefore, there is a sense in which an imminent collapse of order is being foretold. Snead's argument is instructive of *Things Fall Apart* as signifying a visioning of an ominous and catastrophic future for the world, and in this case, the African "world. It is in this regard that the eventual European onslaught on the African society and latter cultural dislocation in Africa created a rupture of an essence. By quoting '...Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' Achebe demonstrates the full import of Yeats' poem which illustrates chaos and disorder as inevitable interruptions of the order of society. In the Umuofia community, it is played out in the ways that the traditional-cultural life of the people is truncated and taken out of their control. By interrupting the cultural flow of the Umuofia people through the subtle introduction of the Christian God, the white man succeeded in creating a disorder in the cultural and religious life of the people. Consequently, the basis upon which the people lived and celebrated life was not only questioned but altered.

Engaging the Socio-cultural and Religious Contexts of the African World in *Thing Fall Apart*. In a significant way, *Things Fall Apart* represents the cultivation of a native literary awareness for both cultural and political nationalism well beyond the aesthetic valuations that define their existence- as literary productions, Gikandi argues that "Achebe's novels had become an essential referent for the African cultural context" (10). Indeed, the cultural and traditional pictures of the African landscape which *Thing Fall Apart* as a text provides, more or less, stands as an institutional representation of an African cultural space. The subject which the text deals with operates as counter narratives in the representation and redefinition of the African. In significant ways, the Umuofia community did not fit the Eurocentric conceptions of the African jungle. In *Things Fall Apart*, the difference in terms of the European conceptualization of the African and the African

reality that exists are significantly illustrated. In the opening sentences in *Things Fall apart*, the narrators says “Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements” (2). Fortunately, among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered” (10). What this description suggests is contrary to the stereotype which had defined the African as indolent, inherently lazy and incapable of being rational. Here the sense of the ‘homo economicus’ plays out as man, and in this case, Okonkwo strives to carve his identity outside the referent of his father, Unoka.

What Achebe demonstrates here is a strategic counter representation and silencing of the European anthropologists’ narrative and myth of the impenetrable jungle of darkness that was Africa. What emerges is an Umuofia society that exists on a well-defined corporate structure complete with cultural ideals and traditional institutions regulating the affairs of the people. At the funeral of Ezeudu, a great man and the oldest in Umuofia, Okonkwo accidentally kills the man's sixteen year old son. Consequently, “the only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land.”

If the Umuofia community was to be the jungle inhabited by savages, surely, Okonkwo with all his strength and accomplishments would have resisted going on exile to his mother's village, Mbanta. Certainly it is a society in which no one, irrespective of his social status, is above the law. Achebe is also quite critical of some characters and some of the traditions in Umuofia. Okonkwo for example, is presented as an irascible and choleric character whose emotional decisions are almost near or indeed always catastrophic for him. Okonkwo shoots at and almost kills his second wife over a minor incidence of woman “who had merely cut a few leaves” from a banana tree to wrap some food (11). When Ikemefuna is killed, it is Obierika who clearly ensures that Africa and the African reality that exists are significantly illustrated.

The opening sentences state that what Okonkwo did “will not please the gods” (2). Although Achebe represents what was well known throughout the nine villages and the image of an African society that is fully grounded even beyond, his fame rests on solid personal and organized achievements. Achebe is not hesitant in revealing any ugly incidents in the community. Thus, he does not always present the idyllic society especially in instances such as the mutilation of dead bodies of Ogbanjo so that their spirits do not return to haunt their mothers, or in the killing of twins. Suicide too, is an abominable act and is so unequivocally condemned. The encounter between the District Commissioner and the men who lead him to where Okonkwo's body is hanging after his suicide is very instructive of the strong legacy of tradition, “...perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him”, said Obierika.... 'It is against our custom'... 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it....” (2, 3).

Achebe shows that the Umuofia community' is not a disorganized settlement; it is a community

of nine villages that had structures and layers of organised activity and lived more on a prescribed but unwritten code. Every activity and engagement had a calculated ambience around it. Visitors are well treated; where kola nut is offered to the guest with reverence irrespective of how poor the host is as shown by Okonkwo's father, Unoka when Okoye visits him to ask for the repayment of his two hundred cowries. (5)

It is also a community where language is usually celebrated through the elegance of proverbs since “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm- oil with which words are eaten” (5). Festivals and ceremonies are usually elaborate and expensive, especially taking of chieftaincy titles, marriage ceremonies and deaths especially those of the aged.

The different categories of groups ranging from age-grade, lineage, and council of elders or Ndichie, the Oracle of the Hills and

Caves are essentially social, cultural and, to a large extent political cum administrative. Through these various groups, Achebe responds to the Eurocentric perceptions about Africa by providing a sociological counter discourse wherein Africa is shown in her full cultural splendour. Here, the Umuofia community is one that is completely subsumed in its traditional religion where gods and deities such Ani, Ojukwu, Ifejioku are revered and venerated. It is a society that has reverence for the divine as the people consult the Oracle of the Hills and Caves:

The Oracle was called Agbala, and people come from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbours. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers. (11)

Umuofia people hardly engage in any serious adventure or enterprise without first consulting with the oracles. Similarly, the gods never permit indolence or laziness as Okonkwo's father, Unoka, finds out when he consults Agbala on “why he always had a miserable harvest” (1). The Agbala priestess sternly rebukes him thus:

You have offended neither the gods nor your fathers. And when a man is at peace with his gods and his ancestors, his harvest will be good or bad according to the strength of his arm. You, Unoka, are known in all the clan for the weakness of your matchete and your hoe. When your neighbours go out with their axe to cut down virgin forests, you sow your yams on exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms; you stay home and offer sacrifices to a reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man. (11, 12)

The priestess' rebuke of Unoka clearly suggests that this is a community that is intolerant of indolence and complacency. There is no indication here that laziness is condoned as virtually all members of the community, with the exception of Unoka, are shown to be industrious and hardworking. This part of the narrative provides a

counter to the illusions and yarns spurned about Africa being a society of lazy and indolent people.

The point, therefore, is that colonialists in their zeal for the establishment and institutionalization of European cultural legacies in Africa ignored these core elements of communality and industry that defined the African essence. Indeed, during Okonkwo's exile, he was visited by his friend Obierika who informed him of the destruction of the Abame community which had killed a white man. "The elders consulted their oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them..." (13). Shortly after this, "stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion" (2). Okonkwo's friend, Obierika, admits thus:

It is already too late.... 'Our own men and our sons have joined the ranks of the stranger. They have joined his religion and they help to uphold his government.... The white-man -is very clever. He came quietly tad peacefully 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. (3)

The implication of the metaphor of the knife demonstrates a sense of the severance of the African from his essence in the sense in which Obierika laments before the District Commissioner in reference to his late friend, Okonkwo: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; now he will be buried like a dog..." (3). The anger and tone of resignation in Obierika's voice is indicative of the people's frustration with the Whiteman as a destabilizing agent. To a great extent, therefore, Okonkwo's tragedy brings to an end the Umuofians' loss of both traditional and political power. Consequently, all power was shifted into the hands of the colonialist. Having lost its political and cultural freedom, the writing of Africa's history was left at the hands of colonialist administrators who

chose to write according to their myopic conception of Africa as seen in *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. It is this inscription and the definition of the African as 'primitive' and 'tribal' which is the source of European 'civilizing' mission in Africa. It is equally against such narrow perceptions by the coloniser that Achebe directs his gaze as he educates the Whiteman on what indeed constitutes culture, which culture provides the ideal standards for measuring civilisation. It is in this context that Yeats' poem becomes instructive in its referent to the coloniser as that other that made things to fall apart in Africa.

Conclusion

It is remarkable that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958 still remains an enigmatic and compelling novel even in the 21st century. Abiola Irele argues that *Things Fall Apart* “expanded the human perspective of the early novels in English, which had begun to take a measure of the drastic reordering of African lives by Western cultural impositions” (8). Indeed, the text's legacy lies in its total apprehension of the traditional African reality in the wake of European invasion of its cultural legacies through colonization. By redefining the African in his primary space with all the splendour of his culture, Achebe upholds the identity of the African in an anti-colonial mode.

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