

The Clash of Cultures' Image in Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract:

The main objective of this research article is to remark the "The clash of cultures in Chinua Achebe's Novel Things Fall Apart" which by virtue of collecting different scholars and artists' literary views and manuscripts, revealed the intellectual views of Achebe and opinions on the cultural conflict between the African tribal culture particularly the Nigerian culture and the European one. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) method was adopted in analyzing the data of this article; where some quotes were analyzed in the light of the writer's views and opinions towards his own culture and its clash with invasive European culture that has come down to the African people through the arrival of the colony. Having carried out such analysis, the articles has come out with very significant results and findings regarding the clash of cultures in the novel "Things Fall Apart" to mention only a few that the culture allowed all men to achieve success through hard work and bravery, and the clash between the British and Umuofian cultures resulted in a systematic breakdown of the Umuofian society as confronted by the dominance of the British principles.

Key words: Chinua Achebe, Clash of Culture, Things Fall Apart

INTRODUCTION

History is the story of civilizations rising and falling, crashing and colliding, new ones emerging, old ones growing bigger and stronger, and some dying. The aggression of civilizations has been motivated by greed for resources and the power to subjugate, as well as by religious enthusiasm. In ancient and medieval times, only neighbouring countries could interact or go to war. With the advent of ocean-traversing sailing vessels came the dawn of imperialism and empire building, as white Europeans subjugated the native peoples of the world in search of riches, resources, and an ever-enlarging empire. The aboriginal races were treated as property without the right to freely live their lives by the ways of their choosing.

Africa was one of the prominent continents that suffer a lot from the injustice European colonialism that take the indigenous people rights to live as they wish, which can be considered as an expected behavior from a colonialist, but claiming that colonialism was the best thing happened in the African miserable life, and that European colonialism brings modernity and takes the African out of the darkness they live into the lights of the European culture was unacceptable in Chinua Achebe's views and some of the real Africans at that time.

CHINUA ACHEBE'S PROFILE

Albert Chinualumogo Achebe was born in a time of conflict between his ancestor's legacy, religion and history and colonialist's culture and religion. After tracing his early life (his childhood) and education, it is clear that Achebe faces and feels the same conflict in his life, the stories that his mother and elder sister tell him about feeding him more than usual to love his own culture, besides his two years of study in his native

language helps him adore his history as an African, these lay the foundation for enthusiast Achebe to struggle and fight to prove what his kinsmen had in their lives worth mentioning and considering by the next generations and defending this culture against the European hearsays about the African people saying that they live in a primitive way wearing raffia skirts and jumping in the jungles, furthermore, they describe them as savages and barbarian live in the darkness, saying it is the European colonialism that brings light to Africa.

After reading Joseph Conrad's novel "Heart of Darkness" and Joyce Cary's "Mr. Johnson" describing the life in Africa after a short visit to the outside world as mentioned earlier, Achebe finds himself in a position of defender and protector to prove the lies of the European colonialist writers, almost spending his life to success in convincing the world that Africa is a rich land of natural resources and cultures emphasizing the traditional theory which says that everyone sees his things normally and acceptable from inside but he may see the others' things as queer and strange, simply because, he looks to it from outside, this is what the European colonialists fall in.

As a writer Achebe needs to use the same weapon to fight his kinsmen's enemy, he uses a mirror to successfully reflects the African society's lives, customs, traditions, values and religions, this mirror is his novel "Things Fall Apart" he makes intransparent enough to let the Europeans and the rest of the world as well see the real life in Africa, the thing they don't find in the European writings.

Achebe writes his most famous and successful novel "Things Fall Apart" to reflect the African daily life and to show their complexity and modern culture, depicting his society's richness life and telling their story to the world but from African perspective, portraying Ibo people living happily and satisfied before the appearance of the white man who forces them to abandon their culture and religion to adopt his culture

and Christianity, just because he thinks that he is on the right side pretending to be benevolent towards the local residents and then being the main reason for their collapse and disintegration.

Historically speaking, the action of "Things Fall Apart" belongs to the first phases of colonial contact with Igbo land. But the Action in this novel transcends the narrow confines of a group of villages in Ibo land and reflects the trauma of African nations that seek the survive colonialism without sacrificing the cultural values that are traditional and indigenous.

THINGS FALL APART: THE MIRROR OF CULTURAL CONFLICT & TRADITIONS

Things Fall Apart (1958), Achebe's first novel, provides a vivid picture of Ibo society at the end of the nineteenth century. The story of "Things Fall Apart" is concerned with the passions of living people, with the validity of traditional religion, with property ownership, relations between the rich and the poor and the arrangement of marriages and celebrations of deaths. It reflects the real life of Ibo people and their cultural system.

In an interview with Chinua Achebe, Nkosi asked him when and why he did write "Things Fall Apart" accordingly Achebe said:

"I wrote 'Things Fall Apart' in (1958), or rather, it was published in (58), I start working on it at the end of(56). But the story itself had been sort of maturing in my mind for about two years previously...and on the things that set me thinking was Joys Cary's 'novel Mr. Johnson' which was praised so much, and it was clear to me that this was a most superficial picture, not only of the country but even of the Nigerian character, and so I thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from inside".

The conflict in the novel, vested in Okonkwo, derives from the series of crushing blows which are levelled at traditional values by an alien and more powerful culture causing in the end traditional society to fall apart.

The title of the novel is abstracted from Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" Achebe's major concern in "Things Fall Apart" is like that of Yeats's in his "Second Coming" is with the decline disintegration and fall of civilization, more explanation can be clear in this quotation :

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world".
(W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming).

Achebe uses the career of Okonkwo to depict traditional life before and during its confrontation with western cultural influences. He also uses it to explore the twin themes of individual and group tragedy which resulted from the breakup of the unity of this traditional life. Okonkwo's life history illustrates the working of the traditional system because he is a fully realized traditional character. This doesn't mean that Okonkwo is a representative of the Ibo race or that his life is an illustration of values which Ibo people admire as was expressed by D. G. Killiam in his critical analysis of the novel "Okonkwo must be seen as an individual who has, as human being must have, distinctly individual traits as well as personal weakness.

These two levels of the novel are well described by Ernest:

"There are two levels on which the novel moves:
The level of Okonkwo, the intense individual with a passionate belief in all the values and traditions of his people, and that of Umuofia, a clan of nine villages that lie deep in Iboland. Things Fall Apart is thus seen as a story of a man and his people. A man who is inflexible, driven by an

obsession to uphold a way of life in which he has an abiding faith. This inflexibility runs counter to the flexibility of a system more prone to change and less authorization, a society in which the seeds of change are inherent as they perhaps are in any society, given time. The flexibility of this society is visible in the absence of a central authority and absolute laws”.

The inflexibility of Okonkwo is clear in his absolute refusal to identify himself or his family with everything that is directly related or stood for his father. In Okonkwo's eyes, his father Unoka was a failure. He was an effeminate, improvident man who wasted his time playing his flute when he should have been tilling the lands, going to war or winning titles. Unoka's cardinal sin was gentleness. He was a musician and poet, time and money were of no consequence to him.

Okonkwo's relationship with his late father shapes much of his violent and ambitious demeanour. He wants to rise above his father's legacy of spendthrift, indolent behaviour, which he views as weak and therefore effeminate. This association is inherent in the clan's language—the narrator mentions that the word for a man who has not taken any of the expensive, prestige-indicating titles is 'agbala', which also means “woman.” But, for the most part, Okonkwo's idea of manliness is not the clan's. He associates masculinity with aggression and feels that anger is the only emotion that he should display.

Unlike his father, Okonkwo was well known for the nine villages. Okonkwo's fame had grown “like a bush in the harmattan”.

He was a wrestler, a great warrior, a man with personal wealth, three wives and barns full of yams. He had acquired two titles and a third would most certainly his, given time. His stature is thus of a heroic figure whose flaws, if any, were beyond his ability to resist, the result of preordained sequence, the workings of a chi or personal god.

Achebe early in the novel exposes the flaws of Okonkwo's character. The author emphasizes his driving ambition, his intolerance and anger, and his rejection of those values which his father Unoka cherished. Unoka in spite of all his shortcomings had a great passion for music and folklore.

The conflict between father and son is a traditional conflict between masculine and feminine virtue. Okonkwo oversimplifies this traditional conflict; he insists with a rigid firmness that his own sons set their faces against any feminine virtues (which bring him haunting memories of his father) and instils into them the virtues of masculinity and aggression. This conflict between strength and gentleness is to prove a dominant factor in the ultimate tragedy of Okonkwo, and in the life of his son Nwoy. Nwoy represents that generation of Africans that stands on the threshold of change, a generation that will not accept implicitly the values of the society of their fathers.

The problem with Okonkwo is that he does not balance masculinity with femininity, gentleness and roughness. His son Nwoy notices this and seeking this balance he joins the missionaries. Okonkwo's aggressiveness and self-assertion are not only disturbing to his son, in whom he sees a streak of his father's nature, but also bring him into dramatic conflict with his clansmen. The shadow of this flaw in an otherwise heroic figure lengthens as the novel unfolds.

Okonkwo's violation of the week of peace is the first instance of the conflict between an inflexible individual and a clan that will not forgive a breach of its rigid code, not even for its most eminent warrior and wrestler. Whatever value the clan may attach to manliness and courage is submerged in its allegiance to a greater conviction, the conviction that the earth goddess can be offended and refuse to yield to her bounty.

Achebe depicts the locusts that descend upon the village in highly allegorical terms that prefigure the arrival of the white settlers, who will feast on and exploit the resources of the

Igbo. The fact that the Igbo eat these locusts highlights how innocuous they take them to be. Similarly, those who convert to Christianity fail to realize the damage that the culture of the colonizer does to the culture of the colonized.

“And at last the locusts did descend. They settled on every tree and on every blade of grass; they settled on the roofs and covered the bare ground. Mighty tree branches broke away under them, and the whole country became the brown earth colour of the vast, hungry swarm.” (p: 40)

The language that Achebe uses to describe the locusts indicates their symbolic status. The repetition of words like “settled” and “every” emphasizes the suddenly ubiquitous presence of these insects and hints at the way in which the arrival of the white settlers takes the Igbo off guard. Furthermore, the locusts are so heavy they break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture under the onslaught of colonialism and white settlement. Perhaps the most explicit clue that the locusts symbolize the colonists is Obierika’s comment in Chapter 15: “the Oracle . . . said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts. . . .” (p: 138- 139).

During the Week of Peace, Okonkwo accuses his youngest wife, Ojiugo, of negligence. He severely beats her, breaking the peace of the sacred week. He makes some sacrifices to show his repentance, but he has shocked his community irreparably.

Ikemefuna stays with Okonkwo’s family for three years. Nwoye looks up to him as an older brother and, much to Okonkwo’s pleasure develops a more masculine attitude. One day, the locusts come to Umuofia—they will come every year for seven years before disappearing for another generation. The village excitedly collects them because they are good to eat when cooked.

OgbuefiEzeudu, a respected village elder, informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has said that Ikemefuna

must be killed. He tells Okonkwo that because Ikemefuna calls him "father," Okonkwo should not take part in the boy's death. Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that they must return him to his home village. Nwoye bursts into tears.

As he walks with the men of Umuofia, Ikemefuna thinks about seeing his mother. After several hours of walking, some of Okonkwo's clansmen attack the boy with machetes. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help. But Okonkwo, who doesn't wish to look weak in front of his fellow tribesmen, cuts the boy down despite the Oracle's admonishment. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye deduces that his friend is dead. Okonkwo sinks into a depression, neither able to sleep nor eat. He visits his friend Obierika and begins to feel revived a bit. Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma falls ill, but she recovers after Okonkwo gathers leaves for her medicine.

The death of OgbuefiEzeudu is announced to the surrounding villages by means of the ekwe, a musical instrument. Okonkwo feels guilty because the last time Ezeudu visited him was to warn him against taking part in Ikemefuna's death. At OgbuefiEzeudu's large and elaborate funeral, the men beat drums and fire their guns. Tragedy compounds upon itself when Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills OgbuefiEzeudu's sixteen-year-old son.

Because killing a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo must take his family into exile for seven years in order to atone. He gathers his most valuable belongings and takes his family to his mother's natal village, Mbanta. The men from OgbuefiEzeudu's quarter burn Okonkwo's buildings and kill his animals to cleanse the village of his sin.

Okonkwo's kinsmen, especially his uncle, Uchendu, receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Although he is

bitterly disappointed at his misfortune, Okonkwo reconciles himself to live in his motherland.

During the second year of Okonkwo's exile, Obierika brings several bags of cowries (shells used as currency) that he has made by selling Okonkwo's yams. Obierika plans to continue to do so until Okonkwo returns to the village. Obierika also brings the bad news that Abame, another village, has been destroyed by the white man.

Soon afterwards, six missionaries travel to Mbanta. Through an interpreter named Mr. Kiaga, the missionaries' leader, Mr. Brown, speaks to the villagers. He tells them that their gods are false and that worshipping more than one God is idolatrous. But the villagers do not understand how the Holy Trinity can be accepted as one God. Although his aim is to convert the residents of Umuofia to Christianity, Mr. Brown does not allow his followers to antagonize the clan.

Mr. Brown grows ill and is soon replaced by Reverend James Smith, an intolerant and strict man. The more zealous converts are relieved to be free of Mr. Brown's policy of restraint. One such convert, Enoch, dares to unmask an egwugwu during the annual ceremony to honour the earth deity, an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The next day, the egwugwu burn Enoch's compound and Reverend Smith's church to the ground.

The District Commissioner is upset by the burning of the church and requests that the leaders of Umuofia meet with him. Once they are gathered, however, the leaders are handcuffed and thrown in jail, where they suffer insults and physical abuse.

After the prisoners are released, the clansmen hold a meeting, during which five court messengers approach and order the clansmen to desist. Expecting his fellow clan members to join him in the uprising, Okonkwo kills their leader with his machete. When the crowd allows the other messengers

to escape, Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to go to war.

When the District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo's compound, he finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself. Obierika and his friends lead the commissioner to the body. Obierika explains that suicide is a grave sin; thus, according to custom, none of Okonkwo's clansmen may touch his body. The commissioner, who is writing a book about Africa, believes that the story of Okonkwo's rebellion and death will make for an interesting paragraph or two. He has already chosen the book's title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

CONCLUSION

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe chronicles the clash that led to the disintegration of the Ibo culture during the British colonization of Nigeria in the late 1800's. This story, repeated many times over in history throughout the aboriginal worlds, belies the arrogance and racism of white Europeans that allowed them the audacity to drive entire cultures to the brink of extinction. In a larger sense, these interactions between a dominant Western culture and a vulnerable native culture, were harbingers of the emerging world in which clashes between major civilizations would define global politics.

Aboriginal cultures were viewed as primitive or barbaric by white Europeans, and the people of these cultures were considered savages. The Europeans assumed that the people who inhabited the lands such as Africa and the Americas lacked intellect, culture, and civilization. On the contrary, the native peoples not only had equal intelligence and a greater connection to nature, but they also had well-developed highly complex societies. Achebe shows how the Ibo culture was a highly ordered civilization, rich in tradition. He describes many

aspects of the Ibo culture that reveal the intricacy and depth of their civilization. They had their own language, with legends and traditions of oral storytelling to preserve the culture from one generation to the next. They had symbols of honour, titles, ceremonies, and rituals. They had a system for measuring time, using a four-day unit. Their monetary system was based on natural resources such as yams and cowries. They had a religion that centred on the worship of gods, sacrifices, and magic. The culture allowed all men to achieve success through hard work and bravery. There was a division of labour for the survival of the village which strictly delineated men's and women's work. In their system of government and justice, decisions made by Oracle, elders, and the general citizenry were highly respected. This culture evolved over centuries and had defined the identity of these people. Yet, the British, in their racist arrogance, looked down upon the traditions of these people. They could not recognize its beauty or its richness. They denied the Umuofians the right to exist as a sovereign people and usurped their freedom. One of Achebe's reasons for writing this story was to showcase the effects of losing one's culture. The results are destructive and tragic, both for the individual and for the world as a whole.)

The history of the colonization of Nigeria by the British in the 1800's is described in the last chapter of "Things Fall Apart" by the British district commissioner as "the pacification of primitive tribes of the lower Niger". Ironically, this pacification often involved violence on the part of the British. The British had run a slave trade in Nigeria, viewing the natives as property and denying them basic human rights. When colonization began, missionaries were sent first to convert the Africans and "save their souls". The British wanted to impose their religion and their culture on the Africans, believing they would be better humans if they were more like them. However, the British had ulterior motives as well,

desiring land, power and valuable Nigerian resources such as palm oil, rubber, and cotton. The British achieved dominance by killing all Ibo opposition groups and imposing their own culture upon the natives.

The clash between the British and Umuofian cultures resulted in a systematic breakdown of the Umuofian society when confronted by the dominance of the British. After creating general fear and chaos within the society, the British colonizers then split families, divided tribal communities, destroyed the societal leadership, and undermined their religion. The coming of the British filled the Umuofians with fear and confusion. The Umuofians did not understand British language, customs, or intentions. They had heard that the white men were coming in great numbers, "like locusts". This created chaos among the Umuofians, who did not know what to expect or how to defend themselves. When one British man came to Abame, the Africans killed him out of fear that if they allowed one, many would follow. In response, the British sent many soldiers to massacre the entire village. Historically, the Collective Punishment Ordinance, passed by the British in 1912, stated that if any of the Nigerians acted against a white colonialist, the entire village would be punished. This act sanctioned such atrocities as that which the British committed against the village of Abame. Next, after creating general fear among the people, the missionaries set about undermining their religion. When Christian missionaries arrived in Umuofia, one of the first converts was Nwoye, Okonkwo's son. In response to this rejection of tribal tradition, Okwonkwo disowned him. Many families were split when members abandoned tribal religion to become Christian. When other Ibos converted to Christianity, they killed a sacred python. This act, which defiled their tribal beliefs, forced the tribe to ostracize the converts, further dividing the community. The Reverend James Smith antagonized the Umuofians further and set off a chain of events

which ended in the destruction of the Umuofian societal structure and leadership. When one of his new converts, Enoch, ate a sacred python and unmasked an Egwugwu spirit in public, the Umuofians were enraged. The British retaliated by arresting their leaders, effectively accomplishing the systematic destruction of family, community, religion, and societal power structure. The Umuofian civilization was in chaos, and each individual member was left to decide for himself how he could best survive the onslaught of the British. Okonkwo chose to fight, but then ultimately, to die at his own hand. The subjugation, insult to his manliness, and loss of his very cultural identity were too much for him to bear.

The introduction of Christianity was the first interface in the collision of the British and Umuofian cultures. Ultimately it divided families and disrupted their social customs. Christian missionaries convinced the Umuofians that their traditional beliefs were powerless. The loss of faith in their religion weakened the culture, as it was a cornerstone of their societal traditions and values. For example, Christians disrupted the social structure when they accepted women who had been scorned by the society. They even changed the Ibo's measure of time, teaching them a seven day week to align with the Christian religion, again changing a basic structure of their society. The British did not want to learn about or keep intact any of the Ibo cultures because their arrogance blinded them from seeing the value in any but their own beliefs.

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