

Situating Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart": Things Fall Apart vs. Colonial Discourse

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Abstract

Colonial discourse is a concept that refers to the communication or knowledge that is based on or reveals the relationships between a colonial or imperial power and the colonized communities. It has been a subject of interest and criticism for many writers, especially those from the colonized regions, who challenge the perspective and authority of the colonizers. But, any basic review of Chinua Achebe's work will turn up profound and serious examples of anti-colonial discourses that are effective in asking questions about the challenges and questionable morality of colonialism. He saw that it was a selfish resource-grabbing exercise rather than one arising out of any altruistic or noble intentions. His ire was often against those western writers who perpetuated the idea that the colonizers were motivated by some noble objective. His adept use of images along with the traditional Igbo proverbs build a bridge over the chasm created by the Europeans. The current study is an ardent effort towards understanding the seminal basis of Achebe's writing which asserts that European discourses were obvious colonial tools of hegemony designed to numb the African mind and channelize its sympathy and support for the alien system in the light of "Things Fall Apart"- his first novel and magnum opus that occupies a pivotal place in African literature and remains the most widely studied, translated, and read African novel. It also brings into light how Chinua Achebe's writing in a genre totally alien to the African mode of representation proves to be faithfully matching the subtleties of the African culture, history and so on. To subvert the very unflattering picture of a non-thinking, irrational and exotic African, Achebe sets his character very ordinary. Achebe establishes a village social structure and its system of exchange and believes signifying the sensitivity of the Igbo culture to the passage of time. Achebe brings in ambivalence to expound on the complexity of a 'black and white' understanding of an African. Duality towards women is skillfully presented in the novel. Finally, the study asserts the point of view of Achebe- placing the society in its history and time frame and presenting it as a living, flexible and logical system capable of thinking and acting for itself.

Keywords: morality of colonialism, seminal basis, African mind, sensitivity of culture, duality, individual thinking.

In the lateral history of African culture, Chinua Achebe occupies a seminal status defined on one side by the consciousness of colonialism, which shaped his identity and the transitory process of decolonization and the awareness of the failure of the colonizers to live up to their promise of completely democratic system, on the other hand. It is on the crossroad of this crucial transaction that Achebe failed to see "a space, I want to stay in and turned to narrative to see a second viewpoint as opposed to the dominant colonial discourse colored by an age-old Igbo proverb. "Wherever something stands, something else will stand besides," Achebe proceeded not only to explicate the dualities implied by this adage but also stress the imperative need of African writers to look at everything twice and re-read the world vision expressed through a colonial ideology. To interrogate and challenge this whole literary canonicity is the first step towards refocusing the centrality on African Literature as the product, not of recent history but a long drawn out process exclusive of the Europeans. Achebe firmly believed that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity" (Achebe, "The role of the writer in the new nation").

The function of the writer, then, was dual, as a defender of the African culture and ideologies while preserving the national consciousness.

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But the major part of the writer's role and a fundamental theme in Achebe's writing is the creation of an African identity denied to them by the colonial system because as Achebe tells Ogbaa "unless our culture begins to take itself seriously it will never sort of get off the ground".

Achebe's writing (theme, ideology, techniques, narrative/literacy sign etc.) was solely dependent negatively on the European discourses, as in the case of **Things Fall Apart** which was motivated by the 'superficial picture' of the African character in Joyce Cary's **Mister Johnson**. It thus, becomes imperative to examine the ways in which the colonial tradition repressed and expressed African character, history and the traditional modes of representation. The colonial discourse in the first case viewed the African continent as David Carroll aptly represents "A landscape without figures, an Africa without Africans". The African was a non- entity who had to be written into existence, not as an individual but as a projection of the European desire fitted to a specific frame. Even then, he was an "unfinished European" striving to gain European values but failing miserably due to his innate weakness. Lacking history, he is unable to comprehend the reality surrounding him. G.T. Basden in his preface to his 1921 account **Among the Ibos of Nigeria** expounds "Let not this be thought strange, for the black man himself does not know his own mind. He does the most extraordinary things and cannot explain why he does them. He is not controlled by logic: he is the victim of circumstances, and his policy is very largely one of drift". The European society fixated on the dominance of reason in every aspect of life saw the duality of the African experience as antilogic and hence inferior. Unable to even comprehend the subtlety of the African reality, the colonizers marshalled a scientific study of the tribal ways based on parameters totally lacking in understanding the ambivalence and dualities of the subject. The knowledge thus acquired was presented in colonial discourses claiming to know, as Achebe asserts "the native psychology and institutions- as understanding is a precondition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding." This forms the seminal basis of Achebe's writing as European discourses such as these were obvious colonial tools of hegemony designed to numb the African mind and channelize its sympathy and support for the alien system.

"The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost". This claim of Achebe is challenged by the very choice of his narrative technique- the novel. The questions are obvious- why is Chinua Achebe writing in a genre totally alien to the African mode of representation? Can something so alien as the novel represent faithfully match the subtleties of the African culture, history and so on? And, more importantly, can the pet discourse of the colonial writers expound the nationalistic feelings and the process of the creation of an African identity with absolute honesty? In fact, it is Achebe's use of this very western literary genre that makes him the first African literary figure. This is not to say that he was the first African to write in an African language, he was preceded by writers such as Mofolo, Shaaban Robert, Sol Plaatje, Peter Abraham and more significantly Amos Tutuola whose contributions can't be underestimated. But it is also true Achebe felt that he was surrounded by an overwhelming hegemony of colonial discourse which he called "the sedate prose of the district-officer-government-anthropologist of sixty or seventy years ago." It was this discourse that the African writer had to subvert to include an interpretation favorable to the African sentiments. Thus, Achebe's novels are fired with a sense of mission, of an awareness that the novel provides a new way of organizing Africans, especially Igbo culture balancing on the brink of colonialism to national independence while observing the historical and social conditions of the society. The inventive function of this genre is also fully recognized by Achebe when he states that "art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence through his imagination". The novel, therefore, provides him with an opportunity not only to recognize the traditional African society but also to create an alternate space of reality within the accepted colonial discourse exclusive of the "prison house of colonialism (Gikaniidi).

More importantly, the narrative as a literary device allows the identification of the situation, character and theme by the reader. This is central to the understanding of any anti-colonial, nationalistic text as the very rudiments of it are based on the sympathy of the reader to the cause expostulated by the writer. Thus born at a time when the colonial ideology had been internalized, Achebe exiled from his native culture used the novel to reinvent a community as Baid argues "as an assertion of belonging in and to a place, to some people, a heritage. It (nationalism) affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and by doing so, it fends off exile, tries to prevent its rages". In fact as Achebe states categorically that it was precisely his alienation from his ancestral tradition that made him a writer. Distanced from the Igbo culture Achebe was able to discern and create a space situated at the "crossroads of culture", which at least hinted at the possibility of a new African discourse. Both **Things Fall Apart** and **Arrow of God** stress on the indispensable theme of Achebe being located at a period of transaction not only on the political ideology but also in the socio-economic system.

This displacement of the society and its values steam up to an obvious anxiety, transmitted in Achebe's novels through the different narrative strategies and multiple perspectives adopted by him. They help to "scrutinize, challenge and accept with all its consequences" as Ronald Barthes observes the dominant tradition which is almost a precondition for modern literature.

Things Fall Apart - the novel with all its consequences as against the colonial discourse

"I am writing about my people in the past and the present, and I have to create for them the world in which they live and move and have their being"

(Kalu Ogba 'An interview with Chinua Achebe')

Achebe reacts to his first book, **Things Fall Apart** with a tentative understanding of a process which required of him "an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son". He clearly understood that to create a discourse of resistance and recognize the social structure of a culture overshadowed by slavery and foreign domination, it was imperative that the African writer should first reconcile and then reinterpret the past not according to a colonial ideology but one based on the traditional African thinking. The past colonial discourse, as mentioned before, evoked a mythical Africa which "as setting and background ... eliminates the Africans as human factor" (Achebe).

He is seen as a non-entity in contradiction to all the characteristics held in esteem by the Western world. Unable to comprehend the reality of his being, the African is transformed into an exotic being fascinating the European superficial reader by his very supposedly different and hence inferior cultural values and traditions. To subvert this very unflattering picture of a non-thinking, irrational and exotic African, Achebe sets his character, right from the beginning in the ordinary. The novel starts with a very realistic portrait of Okonkwo's situation in his village, Umuofia, not only in the present but drawing from the past. The ordinariness of the subject, the signs and the language are used consciously by Achebe to jerk the reader to the world of the normal from the anticipated exoticism through an ongoing process of identification. The passage candidly locates Okonkwo in a world not far removed from ours metaphorically while carrying a flavor of its own. The drums, the flutes, the bushes add a touch to the passage exclusively African, whetting the interest of an unbiased reader. Unlike the colonial writers like Conrad and Cary who use these images to create a distance Achebe uses them along with the traditional Igbo proverbs (e.g.) A toad doesn't run in the daytime for nothing; an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned) to build a bridge over the chasm created by the Europeans. More importantly for Achebe striving to locate the African in history, the representation here and in the rest of the novel naturalizes Okonkwo's situation while grounding it in the collective past. The comparison of Okonkwo's fight with Amalinze the Cat to the "fiercest (fight) since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of world for seven days and seven nights" is strategically and subtly placed to maximize the effects of a culture with a history alive in their memories. The shifting time frame from the present to the past and back to the present clearly explicates the continuity of history denied to them by colonial discourse. In doing this Achebe also manages to expound another feature of African culture repressed by colonial writers that of a community geared to fend for itself with active individuals as well as communal action vis-à-vis a stale, static society passive in its associations. Achebe focuses on this right in the beginning when he stresses that Okonkwo's fame rested on solid personal achievements" while also describing the wars leading to a successive historicity.

Things Fall Apart is indeed steeped in historicity with Achebe establishing a village social structure and its system of exchange and believes signifying the sensitivity of the Igbo culture to the passage of time. Beginning at a time of undoubted freedom the village of Umuofia along with its related eight/nine villages is shown to be continuing an untampered beat of life with its birth, festivals, marriages and death. With the coming of the 'white man' disturbance and turbulence. It's the missionaries and administrations overzealous action that leads to the ultimate ghastly act- the suicide of Okonkwo symbolizing the entire spectrum of African and specifically Igbo culture. Leading to the comprehension of this brutality Achebe gently maneuvers the reader to a position of appreciation of the minute subtleties present in a traditional system by drawing a comparison of the emotional farewell afforded to Okonkwo by the supposedly unfeeling Igbo men like Obierika and the clinical approach of the Commissioner. Even his description of the market day, Week of peace, New Year Festival, egwugwu, the marriage feast or sometimes even as mundane as Akueke'sfigida are aimed at arousing the curiosity and consequently the aesthetic appreciation and awareness that every specific detail has the stamp of time. Twined with present Achebe uses phrases such as 'old as the clan itself', 'ancestors' or even 'folktales' which hint at a past long gone through no less dramatic. In fact the folk tales along with the proverbs have a very exclusive task as not only are they a peep-hole to a universe totally bound off from the reader alien to their culture but they also act as a completely African genre separate from the colonial discourse while commenting on the culture itself. Thus, Achebe while discussing the transaction from a free state to a colonial system is also searching for a compromise where the African is not alienated from "his history, representation and subjectivity" (Gikandi).

Achebe through writing a novel was always aware of this alienation in this genre. This anxiety he tried to combat by introducing a narrator with a shifting perspective so that as Taiwo points out the reader of Achebe's discourses discover that "no one point of view is wholly acceptable and that, to reach a satisfying conclusion, several points of view have to be taken into consideration (**Culture and the Nigerian Novel; Oladele Taiwo**). The first question that arises is considering the identity and authority of the narrative voice or even if the narrative voice can be classified to a specific person. Critics like Carrol and Innes believe that the narrator is "the recreation of the persona which is heard in tales history and proverbs and poetry belonging to an oral tradition" (Language, Poetry and Doctrine in **Things Fall Apart**; C.L Innes). In other words, the village elder who has gone through the collective experiences of society and represents the traditional perspective in an ever-changing environment. The problem with this view is the hypothesis on which it is based. There is no evidence in the entire text which can conclusively place the narrator in the continuing process of transformation of the Igbo society in terms of gender, age or class. Moreover, Achebe's use of duality is highlighted when the narrator comments on the ongoing event along with the cultural methods from a distance, describing it as if it were a foreign (as against foreigner) analyst. Qualifying Okonkwo's grim struggle against poverty and misfortune resulting in his success, the narrator reinstates it by stressing that the Igbo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his Chi it says yes also". This example clearly defines the distance between the addressee and addresser who consider the value they are commenting on as the 'other'. Reinforcing the hypothesis against the narrator as an elder of the community is the instance when the narrator speaks as the 'other'- one of the myriad conflicting voices. When one of the Christian converts tries to explain the concept of the Osu to Mr. Kiaga, part of the speech is in quotes while the rest isn't:

"You are our teacher, and you can teach us the things of the new faith. But this is a matter which we know". And he (Christian convert) told him what an Osu was.

He was a person dedicated to a God, a thing set apart- a taboo forever, and his children after him...". By doing this Achebe is clearly endowing the convert's speech with narratorial authority and credibility. This ambivalence of the narrator's position also questioned vis-à-vis his credibility as a narrator. Instances can be pointed in the novel where the narrator seeming to take a particular perspective ends up focusing on the negativity (as against) of that view. The most clear example is the narrator's view of Unoka, Okonkwo's father as "lazy and improvident and (was) quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow". Countering this is the "face beaming with blessedness and peace" while playing his flute. Unoka is reversely presented as a man in peace with himself and the world, well loved by everyone and in lieu with all aesthetic and humanistic values of the Igbo culture. The double voice of the narrator reinstates Taiwo's claim that a compromise is the only possible perspective for an understanding of the complex dualities present in **Things Fall Apart**.

Okonkwo- ambivalence in his character and relationships

"The will of the tribe or family, expressed or implied, permeates his (African) whole being, and is the deciding factor in every detail of his life".

(Basden; **Among the Ibos of Nigeria**).

Okonkwo, the protagonist has been placed in a specific temporal, functional and cultural framework to highlight not only the influence of values held by a community on an individual but also to focus on the resistance offered to the changing socio-economic sphere by the traditional system. He is the cultural hero, comparable to the founding fathers of Umuofia, who upholds the Igbo identity in a fast changing world while leading his tribe in an avenging war against the encroaching enemy. Firmly believing in the collective experience and mythology of the past, for Okonkwo only the old truths are sensible and comprehensible. Achebe here again brings in ambivalence to expound on the complexity of a 'black and white' understanding of an African by his presentation of Okonkwo's character in relation to Unoka, his father. Okonkwo's life is clearly states as "dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness"- the two traits he identified with his father more than this Okonkwo feared himself 'lest he should be found to resemble his father". But Okonkwo's belief that has rejected his paternity and 'washed his hands' off his father's weakness is an illusion precisely because he was "ruled by one passion- to hate everything that his father had loved". The identity of Okonkwo thus is still dominated by Unoka for it is only in negating his father can Okonkwo define himself. His consciousness, so dominated by his obsessive hatred can bring itself into existence only by a progressive medium built in opposition to those values intrinsic to his father's psyche. Okonkwo's heroism then, can be seen in contradiction to Unoka's cowardice for Okonkwo was a 'man' of action, a man of war unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. "But in doing so Okonkwo is also repressing basic part of his identity- that of a humane, sensitive man. For while rejecting his father's weakness, Okonkwo has also rejected his gentleness, his aesthetic appreciation and continents gleaned from it. To sustain his public image as a man Okonkwo "never showed any emotion openly, unless it is the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength. "Thus he lived against his true nature as "down in his heart, Okonkwo was not a cruel man".

In his quest for self-realization as exclusive of his father, then Okonkwo has managed to prevent the very ideology he hopes to sustain by his obsession of hatred against the values most characterizing Unoka.

The complexity of an easy comprehension of the external reality is questioned again by Achebe in Okonkwo's relation to his society. This question can be viewed from two divergent perspectives exclusive of each other. Many critics agree that Okonkwo is alienated from the basic Igbo values and tradition in the very process of trying to perfect them. His life is seen as a reflection of a man trying to live up to a 'great cultural ideal' (Gikandi) in the face of a community transforming its value system to serve the pragmatic needs of time. His social conformism degenerates into what Trele calls "an inverted sort of conformism" where instead of living according to traditional dictum he subverts them. Thus, not even the fear of goddess prevents him from beating Ojiugo during the Week of Peace. This view of Okonkwo as idealist cum non-conformist can be contradicted by focusing on Okonkwo as an individual true to the basic identity of Igbo culture (referring to Basden's quotation) willing to fight even die for his beliefs rather than give them up. This doesn't mean that all change is negative, only that which is intrinsically threatening to the core of his being and that of his community. Okonkwo's non-conformity here can be seen as a form of rebellion against a society malleable to a culture alien and physically powerful than them. For if Umuofia "chose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself"- as a thinking individual as against the passive African of colonial discourses. His last act of rebellion- committing suicide- can be viewed as an imperative reminder for action against an encroaching system which would swallow up all that is intrinsic to the Igbo people. The dangling body is also a predated symbol of the consequence of a non-unified struggle resulting into "tumult instead of action". Whichever perspective we choose, it has to be agreed on that ambivalence is central to the understanding not only of Okonkwo and the traditional system which he interprets but also to the understanding of Achebe without which **Things Fall Apart** would fall flat.

Duality towards women

"There were many women, but they looked on from the fringe, like outsiders".

(Achebe, **Things Fall Apart**, pg. 86)

Another ambiguity which is apparent in the patriarchal society of Umuofia is the outlook towards the women. Many instances can be found where women are marginalized to accommodate men and values implied to them. Okonkwo is clearly shown negating characteristic he considers feminine. The most apparent example being is desire to take the highest title as the men who take no title, like his father, are called agbala, another euphemism for 'woman'. Now, the ambivalence sets in as Agbala is also the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves where the misfortune "came to find out what the future held for them" and the worshippers "came to seek knowledge (and) crawled on their belly through the hole and found themselves in a dark, endless space in the presence of Agbala. Thus, Agbala as God and woman controls men like Okonkwo same as the Earth goddess Ani, by whose will only yam, the sign of manhood, grows. Instances such as these are liberally spindled throughout the novel and point to an important principle of Igbo society, patriarchal in its nature. In presenting these Achebe cannot be presumed to be anti-feminist. In fact in honesty reflecting the ambiguous state of woman in a traditional society, Achebe is focusing also on the underlying power that a conscious woman can achieve in a male dominated framework. For example Ndulue could not do anything without telling Ozoemena. Thus, the position and role of women though shown to be marginalized in **Things Fall Apart** has to be carefully examined to reveal the intricacies of a man-woman relationship in a traditional value system.

Things Fall Apart

"He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart".

(Achebe, **Things Fall Apart**, pg. 176)

The understanding of the title is seminal to any genre of writing as it is a collective reflector, first of the whole text and its consequences, then of the literary history preceding the writer. From it the text, as well as the writer can be placed in a certain temporal, cultural and historical framework. Achebe, therefore, by borrowing the title from Yeats's 'Second Coming' is an objective central to the whole Negritude movement. In appropriating the voice of another poet, in another culture and from the past, he manages to draw a crucial parallel between the monstrous second coming of the 'rough beast' with the destruction of the basic African ethos of an opposite inspiration. **Things Fall Apart** aptly reflects Yeats's foreboding of the coming of a nightmarish time when the future would be "hierarchical, multiple, masculine, harsh and surgical". This historical process as Yeats explains it is the "end of an age which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, (which) is represented by the coming of an gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction". The hanged body of Okonkwo, in **Things Fall Apart**, symbolizes "mere anarchy (is) loosed upon the world" (Yeats 'Second Coming') destroying the individual in his traditional space. Therefore, the title of the novel can be perceived on two levels- the individual and the community.

Achebe through this duality focuses on the effect and consequences of a single overriding historical event- the coming of the 'white man', in this instance, on the beliefs of a specific individual, Okonkwo and the ancient value system of the Igbo people, as a whole. For Achebe the dawn of the colonial era is the crossroad from freedom to slavery and a point of embarking for the comprehension and realization of African and particularly, Igbo history through a Black perspective in retrospect. In **Things Fall Apart**, then he is trying to come to terms with the actual process of dislocation which took place to realize for himself what it must have meant.

The consequence of a physical powerful culture encroaching on an individual and his beliefs is interpreted through Okonkwo. Trapped in a society willing itself to change, Okonkwo finds himself alone in his struggle against the colonial idiom. Still undaunted by the fact of complete destruction, Okonkwo forces himself to take the last rebellious step both against a traditional system crumbling at its feet and the alien culture imposing itself in a framework of domination. Not only in the related external environment, **Things Fall Apart** also traces the breaking down of Okonkwo as a man. Geared from childhood "by a great passion- to become one of the lords of the clan", the first part of the book relates the progress from poverty and misfortune, wealth and fame till he was considered 'one of the greatest men of his time'. The second part reverses this movement radically and presents Okonkwo in exile try to rebuild his life "But it was like beginning life are without the vigor and enthusiasm of youth". From henceforth the decline of Okonkwo begins where to struggles to build a life for himself based on a traditional system exclusive of the ongoing transformation in the community. In the end rather than be a part of a society which in this point of view has lost its 'manhood', Okonkwo embraces a 'shameful death' comparable to his father. The changing ethos forces on him a realization of the similarity of situation between Unoka and himself where both are a 'figure of displacement rather than fulfill (Gikandi) in their own sphere.

The transformation of a traditional system under the external stimuli of a foreign culture is the basic of **Things Fall Apart**. Achebe while placing the Igbo society in its particular history and time frame is also presenting it as a living, flexible and logical system capable of thinking and acting for itself, evident in the tolerance afforded to the missionaries. But it is still overpowered by a seeming minority of people reflecting an alien system. Why? The Igbo society has created for itself certain spheres of prohibition and exclusion bequeathed to posterity to explain the unknown and control the material conditions of the culture. But when these aspects like the Evil Forest or Odu are introduced upon by the colonizers they lose their intrinsic authority since they are based on the mental construct and belief, only of the Igbo people. Thus, the missionaries are not destroyed by the Evil forest which they call home. In fact by the very act of locating themselves in the Evil forest a 'place alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness' for the Igbos, the colonizers question and undermine the very authority of Igbo beliefs and traditions. This continual process of reorganization of the beliefs of a community unequipped for a complex ideological struggle under the perpetual fear of complete annihilation by the new legal system, leads to the slow destruction of every fibre basic to the conventional system. Thus, as the title signifies the community with its own parameters gives way to slavery and domination.

Achebe's identification and realization with his native culture through the process of writing **Things Fall Apart** is of primary concern while dealing with the question of the function of an African writer in a post-colonial situation. He firmly believed in the crucial role of the Black writers in shaping the future and though burdened down by rejection and anxiety, the need for determined perseverance to reach their objective. For, to Achebe, "running away from myself seems to me a very inadequate way to dealing with anxiety" – a sentiment reflected in his narrative works.

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