

The Impact of Colonization and Cultural Change on the Igbo People: A Study of Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract: *The aim of the study is to critically examine the impact of colonization and cultural change on the Igbo people as depicted in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. The novel is divided into three parts in which the second and the third part introduce the influence of British Colonialism and cultural change on the Igbo community. This novel concentrates more on tribal life and the impact of colonization. An attempt is also made to show how the arrival of white missionaries and colonial administrative gradually started to question and destroyed that traditional life of Igbo people by involving political system, in the place of traditional Igbo on. The novel also depicts conflict in Igbo society partly generated by the impact of European colonialism and partly by tension within the society itself.*

Keywords: Colonization, cultural change, society, colonial encounter

1. Introduction

Aside from being one of the foremost African writers, Achebe is one who has worked hard to dispelling the idealized images of his Igbo people and portraying them as they actually live in real world. Achebe writes about his native Africa, where he was born in 1930. Albert Chinualumogu Achebe grew up in Ogidi, Nigeria, one of the first centers of Anglican missionary work in eastern Nigeria. His father and mother, Isaiah and Janet Achebe, were missionary teachers. Achebe's life as a Christian and member of the Igbo tribe enables him to create realistic depictions of both contemporary and pre-colonized Africa. He blends his knowledge of Western political ideologies and Christian doctrine with folklore, proverbs, and idioms from his native tribes to produce stories of African culture that are intimate and authentic. (TFA 1958)

The setting of the novel *Things Fall Apart* is in the outskirts of Nigerian in a small fictional village, Umuofia just before the arrival of white missionaries into their land. Due to the unexpected arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia, the villagers do not know how to react to the sudden cultural changes that the missionaries threaten to change with their new political structure and institutions. Hence, this aims at analyzing the effects of European colonization on Igbo culture. Towards the end of the nineteenth century most European states migrated to African and other parts of the world where they established colonies. Nigeria was amongst other African nations that received visitors who were on a colonizing mission; introducing their religion and culture that is later imposed on Igbo. The culture of the people of Umuofia (Igbo culture) is immensely threatened by this change.

Achebe's purpose of writing the novel is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. In the novel, *Things Fall Apart* he has presented Igbo community as well as colonialism. He has also shown

how the arrival of white missionaries and colonial administrative gradually started to question and destroyed that traditional life of Igbo people from within by grinding down its value system, firstly through piece-meal religious conversions and then place of traditional Igbo one. Achebe's main concerns in his novel *Things Fall Apart*, seems to be introduction of a new religion as well as its destructiveness in society. (Alimi 121) In this novel the people of Umuofia are divided into two groups because of arrival of white missionaries in their land. The first group is Igbo followers of the white missionaries. Converts to Christianity choose to abandon their own religion, traditional ways of life and fellow people to follow the white man and his ways.

Things Fall Apart also shows light upon Igbo culture. In the novel Igbo culture and society are the well set culture-society with much richness. I can say that the root of cultures is quite the same in different parts of the world. The manifestation of the values and ideas associated with modern European culture. But the basic concepts of African or European cultures are equally respectable and life sustaining:

The Igbo (or Ibo) people form one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, with about 15 million living in Nigeria and another million living outside. Their farming communities are broadly situated between the Niger River in the West and the cross River in the east, stretching from delta swampland near the southern coast through tropical rain forest to open grasslands to the north. (Ohadike-1)

Colonialism has been a recurrent feature of human history. The history of colonialism has existed since ancient times. By 1900 almost every country of region in the world had been subjugated by European colonialism at one time or another. The period after the Second World War saw an upsurge of new independence in 1947. Farces decolonization was marked by wars in French, Indochina, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. Belgium, Portugal, and the

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Netherlands all divested themselves of their overseas possessions during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. "Colonialism" has taken different forms and has engendered diverse effects around the world (Boehmer E).

My aim and focus is to analyze effect of colonization and cultural change of the Igbo people as it appears in the novel, which is before and after the arrival of white missionaries in Umofia.

2. Discussion

The title *Things Fall Apart* was adopted from William Yeats poem "The Second Coming" (1921). The poem focuses the end of the present age and the worlds approach to another that is completely different:

*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,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.* (Yeats 1921)

Things Fall Apart is located in specific socio-cultural changes which were taking place in the 1880s and 1890s in Eastern Nigerian, in a region known as Lower Niger Delta, which present Igbo social intercourse, Igbo words, and Igbo community rituals, all these bestow a specific Nigerian reality to the novel. It is also centered on the life of the protagonist and the arrival of white missionaries as well as colonial administrative that is clear by the second part of the novel. The third part is about return of Okonkwo from exile at Umofia where he found missionaries and colonial administrative who had come to rule over the Igbo tribe but their hidden intention was to extend the boundaries of British Empire and to rule over the Igbo tribe with new British regime, which had created great disaster in the Igbo lifestyle, brought social disorder, cultural destructions and religious collapse. In this way the novel highly deals with the impact of colonization and cultural change on the Igbo people. They not only suppressed them but also oppressed them with British colonial administration.

At the first, European white missionaries arrived on the bank of the great river of Umuru where they had built their center of religion and government. They began to explore Igbo Nigerian tribe and dark Nigerian parts. They wanted to enlighten and to civilize lower Nigerian tribe with the help of a new Christian religion. Igbo people who had their own religion and customs were entirely destructed by the Christian missionaries. The white missionaries suppressed and oppressed American Igbo religion and the Igbo tribes through their new religion. Benedict Njoku also clarifies in a dissertation about Achebe's writing style. Achebe generally devotes most of the portion of his novel to cultural background. His thesis focuses on the harms of colonialism which proves that Igbo people had grate religion before the arrival of Britishers. "Things Fall Apart expresses the author's nostalgia for the traditions and beliefs of Igbos before European colonialism. It paints out that Africans in general had a high level of value system before the advent of

Christianity."(Njoku 1984, 23) The Europeans converted village members into Christianity and created bad atmosphere within the tribes. Achebe says in *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, these converted people were considered as "the people of the Church" or "the association of God" (p.65) and converted called as "the people of nothing."(Achebe 1975, 65) This kind of changes in the Igbo society openly rejected old traditions and the Igbo ways of life.

Igbo people were happy with their religious beliefs and customers. They believed in various Gods and Goddess like-Chukwu, who was the supreme God who had made the heaven, the earth, the whole world and other Gods, Ani, the owner of the land, Amadiara of the thunderbolt, Idemili, a god of water, Agbola, the oracle of hills and caves. One of the old man of Mbanta asked the question to missionaries.

Which is this god of yours," he asked "the goddess of earth, the god of sky, Amadiora of the thunderbolt, or what.(Achebe 1958, 132)

The Whiteman who did injustice exercise of Christianity replied them: *All the gods who have named are not god at all. They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true God and he has the earth, the sky, you, and me and all of us.* (p.132-33), the church missionaries also tried to prove their Gods and Goddess were false and made of stones and woods. One of the missionaries was Mr.Kiago who addressed the people of Mbanta. In Chinua Achebe's words: *...The white man was also their brother because they were all son of God. And he told them about this new God; the creator of all the world and all the men and women. He told them that they worshipped false gods, gods of wood and stone. A deep murmur went through the crowd when he said this. He told them that the true God lived on high and that all men when they died went before Him for judgment. Evil men and all the heathen who in their blindness bowed to wood and stone were thrown into a fire that burned like palm-oil. But good man who worshipped the true God lived forever in his happy kingdom. 'We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave you wicked ways and false god and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die....'*(p.131-132)

White missionaries realized that it would not be possible to convert the mind of Igbo people any more. We must change our method of converting their mind. Now, we can divert by telling them directly that Igbo people's god were false and their belief were based on falsehood. So they planned to establish schools and hospitals so that they can divert Igbo people. At the beginning they thought about customs and culture of Christianity and god more diverts. In Achebe's expressions,

...[Mr.Brown] came to conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family to begging people to send their children to his school but at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children. Mr.Brown begged and argued and prophesied. He

said that the leader of the land in the future would be men and women who had learnt to read and write. (P.163-164)

Achebe has depicted how Igbo tribe was suppressed by the white missionaries. The main motive of whites was not only to practice their religion but also to expand reign of their government all over the world. In the court of whites Igbo people were brought to get oppressed. In their court, judge would never bother about the cases, and it may happen in many of the cases that judge are totally unaware about the actual case and would not listen to the arguments of both the sides and will give the decision, not brothing about the truth and the false, but depending upon their own benefit. *...they had built a court where the district commissioner judged cases in ignorance... (p.158)*

We shall not do you any harm' said district commissioner to them later, 'if only you agree to co-operate with us. We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice as it is done in my own country under a great queen... (p.175)

After reading all these, I can say that the white men had applied the policy of force on the weak and the miserable tribal people. About the role of conscious novelist like Chinua Achebe, such brutalities have been used by novelist not only to indict colonialism but also to show the impact of colonization and cultural change on Igbo tribes.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the impact of colonization and cultural change receive the main focus of Achebe in his novels in general and in *Things Fall Apart* in particular. In the study it is found that the Igbo people endeavor to protect their religion and way of life but could not do so under the pressure and impact of colonization. If the themes as depicted in Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* are put to the honest conclusion, they purely show that Igbo people could not able to live their life freely and peacefully in the society.

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