

Exploring the Igbo Culture: A Critical Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract:

It has been an issue of debate among the third world writers whether they should express themselves in their native language or in the language of the former colonizer but Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, a Nigerian novelist believed that a writer must write for a social purpose and therefore, chose universal language English as a medium of expression. His novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958), has given his own voice to the African culture. Through this novel, Chinua Achebe not only gave voice to the people of African Igbo clan but has also successfully echoed it in the entire world. This paper would study the Igbo culture recreated by Chinua Achebe along with the colonizer-colonized relationship in postcolonial aspect in *Things Fall Apart*.

Key Words: Post Colonial, Coloniser-Colonised, Igbo Culture, etcetera.

The title *Things Fall Apart* (1958) has been inspired by Yeats' *The Second Coming*.

“.....Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” (Yeats, *The Second Coming*)

This novel depicts a small fictional village Umuofia where Okonkwo has been presented as a central character. He, a man of thirty- eight years old with a good reputation and whose fame was

“known throughout the nine villages and even beyond.” (Achebe,3)

The setting of *Things Fall Apart* is of the year 1890. As the title suggests, *Things Fall Apart*, the novel also records things going out of the control in Umoufia village and in the protagonist's life. Okonkwo, along with his three wives, eight children and other Igbo natives were leading a smooth and reputable life. The novel has been divided into three parts. All these three parts represent Igbo Culture. Part one deals with activities such as harvesting season, superstitions and marriage traditions of Igbo Culture. Part two presents Mbanta as the central place where Okonkwo seeks refuge after being exiled from Umoufia due to the killing of a clan member by mistake. Part three opens after seven years when Okonkwo returns to Umoufia and witnesses the white missionaries converting the natives. The novel, in short, presents the tale of a man and his community at the crossroads of culture and impact of colonization on the same.

Igbo culture refers to the traditions, customs and practices of people of Igbo clan of south-eastern Nigeria. “The Igbo (or Ibo) people from one of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, with about 15 million living in Nigeria and another million living outside.” (Ohadike, 1996).

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* describes Igbo Culture where he has emphasized polytheistic religion, farming traditions, patriarchal society, father-son inheritance and belief in spirits. The whole novel has been woven around the Igbo culture and society. It develops while describing its culture.

The first part presents the Igbo Culture in Umoufia. It deals with activities, beliefs, disbeliefs, and ethnicities. For recreating the Igbo culture, Achebe has used various symbols in the novel. Some of these famous symbols are Igbo music, Igbo chi, Kola nut, and bride price. Igbo music plays an important role and is being played on different occasions. Igbo Chi refers to believing in numbers of Gods. One term related to Igbo Chi is Kola Nut that suggests offering hospitality to visiting priests. The novel also presents the traditions of Igbo society and the depiction of the New Yam festival where great reverence and significance is paid to the earth goddess “Ani” and to the other ancestral spirits. Here it is important to mention that the above said festival is

celebrated not only in Igbo culture but also throughout Africa where an important crop Yams is given and eaten.

“The Feast of the New Yam was approaching and Umofia was in a festival mood. It was an occasion for giving thanks to “Ani”, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility.” (Achebe, 27).

The novel exhibits the celebrations and festivities of the Igbo clan. Besides, the celebrations of New Yam, the week of Peace has also been shown to be observed by the villagers of Umoufia. These celebrations are considered to be made in leisure time and take place before the plantation of crops. The novel also depicts the myth associated with the breaking of peace in the said duration that whosoever breaks the peace will end up with bad omen and dead crops. But as the title suggests, Okonkwo breaks the peace twice and brings misfortune to him. Firstly, by beating his youngest wife for her absence during the afternoon meal(Achebe, 22). Moreover, he also thrashes his second wife.

Trashing or beating a wife also brings forward another feature of the Igbo tribe and exhibits the dominance of men in society. Moreover, it also represents the prevailed practice of polygamy in the Igbo tradition. The novel also depicts the poor conditions of women in the Igbo clan where they are abused, disrespected and even sold as well. The society allowed men to do polygamy but polyandry has not been depicted. Moreover, the engagement of men in bride price has also been exhibited. The Igbo tradition exhibits gender expectations as well as enforcing power on the children as well. When Ezinma, offers to bring a chair for her father, she is rebuked by him

“No, that is a boy’s job.” (Achebe, 53)

The protagonist disliked being associated with the softness because it depicts the powerlessness. Even in his mind, he detests himself to be associated with softness. When he returns to his village after the exile of seven years, he mourned that :

“ Warlike men of Umounfia had been soft like women” (Achebe, 133)

Another attribute of the Igbo tradition presented in the novel is their belief in myths and superstitions. For instance, practicing violence during the week of peace is considered a harbinger of inauspiciousness. Besides, the incident of taking Okonkwo’s youngest daughter Ezinma to a far-off cave and believing her to be an Ogbanje, an evil spirit exhibits belief in superstitions of Igbo community. Another example of practicing superstition is the belief of natives in the sinister power of Evil Forest.

Moreover, there is a reference to Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. (Achebe, 36)

The novel also depicts the belief of Igbo clan in many gods and oracles. As per Igbo mythology, Chukwa has been considered as the supreme god, who is a solar and earth deity. The concept of personal God –Chi is also been mentioned in the various parts of the novel. As Igbo people believed in Oracle, therefore when missionaries came, they claimed that they have a noble cause and hold salvation in the concept of one God. The concept of polytheism of Igbo people is rejected by White Missionaries. Mr. Brown’s comment:

“There are no gods....You carve a piece of wood-like that one and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.” (Achebe, 131)

The Igbo society has been depicted as a backward society. The novels depict the innocent outcasts or discards from the society. Twins are discarding by their own families in the Evil forest because they are considered inauspicious.

The novel also exhibits the strong belief system of Igbo people in superstitions and inauspiciousness. Okonkwo kills his own brought up child Ikemefuna just because Oracle of Umuofia pronounced that the child must be killed. It is notable here that Okonkwo was very fond of the child but kills him because he wanted to prove his toughness as a man. This barbarousness

act exhibits only inhumanity. When Ikemefuna dies, Okonkwo feels saddened and guilty. Later his daughter Ezinma unexpectedly falls ill and then at Ezeudu's funeral, when Okonkwo's gun explodes accidentally killing Ogbueffi Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son, people of the tribe sent Okonkwo and his family into exile for seven years. This act exhibits the blind faith of the Igbo people in superstitions and Oracles. Similar types of acts can be witnessed in Part three when a convert Enoch unmasks an elder Egwugwu embodying an ancestral spirit of the clan. As a repulsive act, the village revenge by destroying the local Christian Church.

The Igbo people have been shown to impart weird and barbarous punishments. They humiliate court messengers by shaving their heads and by whipping. In part one, the life of Ikemefuna is taken by Okonkwo just because an Oracle prophesizes. Moreover, when Okonkwo accidentally

kills Ogbueffi Ezeudu's son, he along with his family had to go to exile for seven years. It happens because Igbo people consider the latter killing a crime against the earth goddess. The people as a punishment burn Okonkwo's property i.e. his buildings. Surprisingly, they also kill his animals as a gesture of cleansing the whole village of Okonkwo's sin. Later, in part three of the novel, when the messengers of the White Government endeavour to stop the meeting, Okonkwo beheads one of them.

Igbo people also analyze the concept of sin differently and weirdly. After Okonkwo commits suicide, his friend Obierika informs the commissioner that as suicide is a grave sin, therefore, none of Okonkwo's clansmen can touch his dead body. This is ironic that Okonkwo could not get the proper burial that he deserved but became a sin committer even in his suicide.

Answering to the question, does the white men understand our customs about land, Chinua Achebe replied that how can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad, and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and 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. (Achebe, 176)

Thus in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recreates Igbo culture. He introduces the traditional Igbo family structure. He exhibits celebration New Yam festivities and the Peace Week. Moreover, in chapter eight and twelve; he recreates the Igbo engagement and wedding ceremony. Chapter ten refers to the Umuofia Supreme Court. Thus Achebe has not only represented the complexities of Igbo culture but has also portrayed the traditional and advanced social and religious institutions. Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to say that *Things Fall Apart* is a picture of Igbo clan well-painted by its author, Chinua Achebe.

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