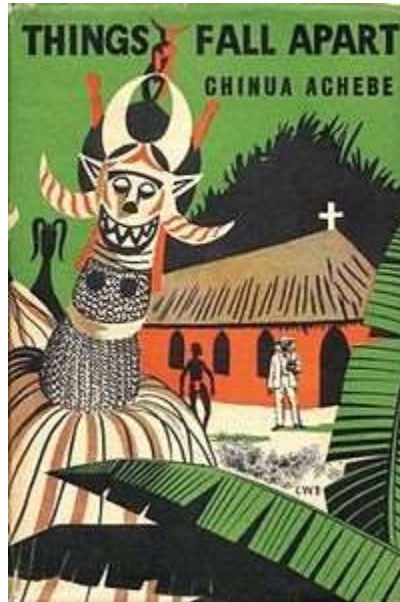


Things Fall Apart as a Postcolonial Text - An Assertion of African Culture

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Abstract

When we study the history of Asian and African countries, the colonial experience plays an important role in the better understanding of their history, culture and religion. *Things Fall Apart* is an English novel by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and it got published in 1957. It depicts the African culture, their superstitions and religious rites through the Ibo society. This novel is a response to as well as a record of the traumatic consequences of the western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and institutes of the African people. This paper is an attempt to study, how in this novel Achebe has tried to prove to his fellow African people that there is nothing shameful in African culture and tradition.

Introduction

For the countries in Asia, Africa and South America, the experience of colonialism plays an important role in the process of understanding their history. When we see this perception in

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the literature of these countries, we study it as postcolonial literature. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin rightly maintain that though historically “post-colonial” implies “after colonization,” in literature, it signifies “all the experience affected by the colonial process from the beginning of the colonization to the present day” (Ashcroft 1-2). Postcolonial studies critically analyze the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, which is based on basically two things – knowledge and power.



Chinua Achebe (1930-2013)

A Post-Colonial Text

Looking from this perspective, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1957) is a postcolonial text. This novel is postcolonial in the sense that it draws a clear line between the colonizer and the colonized. Broadly speaking, this novel is a response to, as well as a record of the traumatic consequences of the western capitalist colonialism on the traditional values and religious institutions of the African people. In his article, *The Novelist as Teacher* (1965), Achebe dwells upon, “the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races” (Roscoe, 122). This disastrous impact brought upon Africa is usually depicted in three phases. The first phase deals with the depiction of the strategies adopted by the white man, for forcefully introducing an alien form of administration, education and religion and thereby inducing the natives to prefer western culture and regard their own religion with contempt. The

second phase deals with the period of resistance on the part of the natives, and finally the third phase deals with the post – independence stage. In this novel, Achebe focuses on the first phase.

The Second Coming

The title of the novel is taken from “The Second Coming,” a famous poem by W. B. Yeats, and its immortal lines have duly been acknowledged by Achebe at the very outset:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer
Things fall apart the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” (Brians 1)

A Fictional Hero

Like most of the African Postcolonial novels, this novel also depicts the fictional hero as the leader of the struggle against colonial powers. Here, Okonkwo- the hero of the novel, is depicted as a leader and a local wrestling champion in Umuofia – a fictional group of nine villages in Nigeria, inhabited by Igbo people. Dr. Lucky Gupta, in one of his essays, rightly asserts, “*Things Fall Apart* is a typical Igbo novel which describes Okonkwo’s rise and fall” (Gupta 1-3). He was well known throughout the “nine villages and even beyond” (Achebe 3). He is strong and hard working. He never shows any kind of weakness. His character is a complete contrast to that of his father Unoka. He is a leader of his village, and he has attained that position in his society, for which he has striven all his life.

Unfolding the Cultural and Religious Beliefs

Things Fall Apart, as a postcolonial text, successfully unfolds the cultural and religious beliefs of the nineteenth century Iboland. As the novel reveals, there used to be a complete hierarchy of Gods and deities ranging from the personal God “Chi” to the greatest God “Chukwu” in Iboland. The shrine of an Ibo man used to have the wooden images of “Chi” and his ancestral spirits. Then there were other deities like Udo, Ogwugwu and Idemili, who used to protect the village and the clan. Ani, the earth goddess was responsible for all the fertility. The natives believed in the omnipresence of God and they used to pray to the lesser gods and deities, in order to approach the highest God Chukwu.

Honest Depiction of the Belief System

Achebe has made an attempt to portray the society honestly. While on the one hand he has celebrated the culture of the natives, on the other he has never for once tried to conceal the shortcomings inherent in their culture. Perhaps it is for this very reason that the behaviour of the natives has been shown as somewhat irrational and the people are depicted as superstitious in religious matters. For instance, at the very outset, parents are seen advising their children not to whistle at night: “Children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits” (*TFA* 9). Likewise, “a snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear” (*TFA* 9).

Moreover, if a person had a swelling in his stomach, it was considered “an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die” (*TFA* 18). It was considered an abomination of earth. So, he was not given the first and the second burial. The people of Umuofia also observed a “week of peace” before sowing seeds in the fields. They believed that if no violence was committed during this sacred week, goddess Ani would get pleased and this will lead the village to prosperity.

The story went round the village that a man had once broken the peace and as a punishment, he was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. Unfortunately, during one such week, Okonkwo happened to lose his temper. He failed to control his rage and he beat his wife, as she could not prepare the food in time. For his misdeed, Ezeani rebuked him and said, “The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish” (*TFA* 30). He commanded Okonkwo to bring a she- goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries to the Shrine of Ani, to repent for the sin he had committed.

Belief in Omens

The people of Umuofia believed in omens and ill-omens too. For instance, the twitching of eye- lid was considered a bad omen. When Okonkwo’s daughter Ezinma said that her eye- lid was twitching, her mother Ekwefi replied, “it means you are going to cry” (*TFA* 40). Likewise, people were afraid of answering back when they were called by their names. When Nwoye’s

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mother addressed Ekwefi by her name, she replied, “Is that me?” (*TFA* 41) The belief in the omens and ill-omens was so deep rooted in the psyche of the Igbo people, that it had become instrumental in shaping their behavior and conduct: “That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear it might be an evil spirit calling” (*TFA* 41). Big and ancient silk cotton trees were considered sacred and it was believed that the spirits of good children lived in these trees, waiting to be born. Similarly, the birth of twins was considered a bad omen and they were put in earthenware pots and were thrown away in the forests. This fact highlights the blind superstitious beliefs of the people, which made them so cruel, that they hardly felt any remorse or regret in throwing away their newly born in the forest.

Superstitious Approach to Life

Achebe relates another incident to depict the irrational and superstitious approach of the people of Umuofia. The second wife of Okonkwo, Ekwefi, was unlucky in the sense that her children did not survive for long. When Okonkwo consulted a medicine-man, he was told that the child was “Ogbanje,” which meant that it was a wicked child who entered the mother’s womb to take birth again. He directed Okonkwo to send his wife at her parents’ home as soon as she becomes pregnant. When the third child was born and circumcised on the eighth day, he was not given proper burial. The medicine-man mutilated his body with a sharp razor and caught it by the ankle and dragged it to the “Evil – Forest.” This event shows the cruel and absurd beliefs of the Igbo society.

The superstitious behaviour of the people of Umuofia is manifested even in the way, in which the people took their decisions. For instance, whatever enterprise the people of Umuofia undertook, it was only with the permission of “The Oracle – the Oracle of Hills and Caves.” The voice of the Oracle was considered no less than the voice of the God: “The Oracle was called Agbala, and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers” (*TFA* 16). Later the story reveals the sheer absurdity on the part of a man who left his profession of palm – wine tapping, just because the Oracle warned him that he would fall off a palm tree and would get killed. A woman Chielo, who was the priestess of Agbala, used to prophesize when the spirits of Agbala

was upon her. Whatever decision she took, was adhered to, by the village folk -be it rational or irrational.

Disastrous Consequences

Achebe was fully aware of the disastrous consequences, which these beliefs could result in. It is probably due to this very reason that he has related two incidents, which particularly highlight, how irrational and even cruel these beliefs can prove to be. The first incident is regarding the custody of Ikemefuna. Because of the great esteem Okonkwo had earned, the elders of the village selected him as the guardian of Ikemefuna. Ikemefuna is taken a prisoner, by the villagers, as a peace settlement between two villages, when his father killed an Umuofian woman. The boy lives in Okonkwo's family and he considers Okonkwo as his second father. Okonkwo also develops a liking for the boy. Eventually "The Oracle" pronounces that the boy must be killed. Despite the warning of oldest man of the village, Okonkwo strikes the fatal blow to his dear child Ikemefuna, who begs before his father for protection. However, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna because "he was afraid of being thought weak" (*TFA* 61). But afterwards he feels restless and finds it hard to eat or sleep. Okonkwo "felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito" (*TFA* 63). The second irrational behaviour of the people comes to light when Chielo comes to Okonkwo's house at night and orders him and his wife to give their child Ezinma to her, as Agbala wanted to see her. When Okonkwo and his wife Ekwefi hesitated, she screamed and said, "Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" (*TFA* 101) Thus both husband and wife feel quite helpless and give the girl to her. These incidents show how blind faith can cause severe harm to the ignorant human society.

Complex Rituals

In the cultural history of Nigeria, complex rituals also played a crucial role in the daily life of people. Achebe reflects these rituals and taboos with rare precision. The space between an individual identity and his ancestors in the society was narrow. In fact, "the land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at festivals and also when some old person died, because an old man was believed to be very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death, was considered a series of transition rites, which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors" (*TFA* 122).

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Several other legends and myths, such as “the earth and the sky,” (*TFA* 53) “the mosquito and the ear,” (*TFA* 75) and “the tortoise and the birds” (*TFA* 96-99) have also been related in the novel. The use of language, in this novel, shares the function of myths. Achebe strongly believes, “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten” (*TFA* 7). Thus proverbs and myths are ways of conveying a meaning through simple conversation rather than forcefully.

Beliefs Keep People Unified

Thus, there were irrational and superstitious beliefs prevalent in the primitive African society. However, in spite of all these shortcomings in the religious beliefs of the people, it had one positive quality. These beliefs kept the people of the community unified. Moreover, Achebe has related incidents which prove that if the culture of natives had its shortcomings, even the western culture was far from being perfect. Towards the second half of the novel, a clash of civilizations comes into light, and Okonkwo’s speech reveals that even Christian beliefs had some irrationalities in them. Okonkwo makes fun of the white man’s religion and their God “Jesu Kristi.” “You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then”(TFA 147). The interpreter was dumbfounded at Okonkwo’s remark and he somewhat awkwardly replied, "I did not say He had a wife"(TFA 147). Through this episode, Achebe seems to suggest that no religion is perfect and no beliefs can be perfectly rational and logical. Okonkwo was not at all impressed with these white missionaries, who came during his exile from the village, and who called African gods- only the pieces of wood.

Emergence of New Religion and Its Impact

However, the emergence of new religion did become successful in creating some doubts in the minds of the village folk. The young generation in particular, felt attracted towards Christianity. The Churches started converting the village folk to Christianity. When Okonkwo asked Obierika whether the white man understands their customs, he replied, “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 peaceably 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” (TFA 176).

Changing Values and Breaking Away from Original Beliefs

Okonkwo was a true patriot. He felt deeply hurt to see his village and his people changing and breaking away from their values and beliefs. In a fit of rage and anger, he killed one of the messengers of the District Commissioner Court, who came to stop the meeting of the villagers. However, he realized that nobody would protest against the white man. In his loneliness and despair, he committed suicide. He preferred to die, than to accept defeat in the battle of religion. He could not even get proper burial. He lost his status and reputation among his own people, as it was a sin to commit suicide in Igbo community. A man informed the District Commissioner, “it is against our custom... It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense 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” (TFA 207).

Conflict between Traditional Decision-Making and Colonial Decision-Making

Towards the end of the novel, Obierika accuses the District Commissioner and says, “that man was one of the greatest man in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog” (TFA 208). Thus the white man failed in crushing the native African religious beliefs of the African society. The natives refused to accept the white man’s authority as far as decision making was concerned. Before the arrival of the colonial powers, they lived in a patriarchal- collective political system. Decisions were made by the elder males in the village and by the husband in the house.

Goal – Preservation of Dignity

Despite himself being a Christian convert, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, not only in response to the various misinterpretations about the native people, but also to depict the dignity of Igbo culture to his fellow citizens. At the same time he never hesitated to “present(s) its weaknesses which require change and which aid in its destruction” (Rhoads 61). This novel attempts to repair some of the damage which has earlier been done by the European novelists to

the African culture. Through the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has made a praiseworthy attempt to show that European sentiments toward Africans are mistaken. The most important achievement of this novel, it seems, is that it has changed the attitude of the people and even the novelists towards Africa and it has set the foreground for numerous African novelists. Before this novel, European novelists portrayed African society as a place of savages, which needed to be enlightened by the Europeans.

Conclusion

Achebe has himself admitted that there are some imperfections in the beliefs of the society but he believes that one should be proud of one's culture and beliefs. In the article *The Novelist as Teacher*, he observes, "I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections - was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them. Perhaps what I write is applied art as distinct from pure. But who cares? Art is important but so is education of the kind I have in mind. And I don't see that the two need be mutually exclusive" (Roscoe, 121). In short, in spite of all the shortcomings and irrationalities in the beliefs of the African people and their society, Achebe implores them to live with self-respect and dignity, without feeling any shame for their past.

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