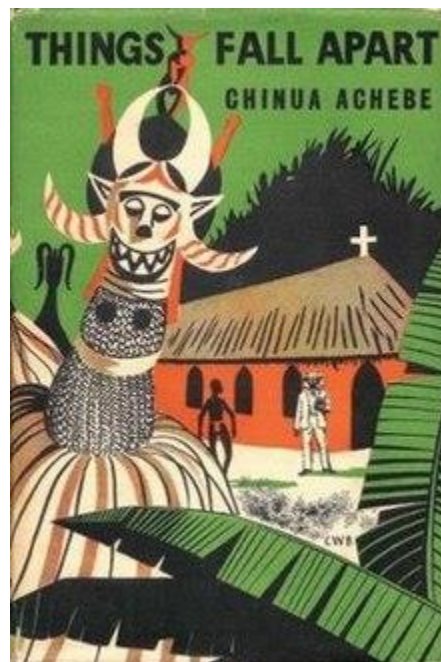


Cultural Binarism in *Things Fall Apart*

Keerthana V., M.A. (I year)



Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart

Abstract

African literature comprises a body of work ranging from oral literature to literature written in English – the language of the colonizers. Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian belonging to the Ibo tribe, is a dominant voice in African literature. Achebe changed the literary standards with his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). His works attempted to voice a concern for the loss of native culture and the strong influence of foreign culture in contemporary Africa. Through his writings, he sought to reveal the life of Africans under colonial rule and also to bring to fore the inherent values of the traditional Ibo culture lost during the colonial rule. Achebe presents the binarism within the Ibo community, within the British, and between the two cultures. The very act of writing about a society that has its roots in oral literature and using English to talk about a non- English-speaking community is, in a way, an act of cultural binarism. This paper attempts to look at cultural binarism in the novel.

Keywords: *Things Fall Apart*, African Literature, native culture, Ibo culture, colonial rule, cultural binarism

Introduction

African culture differs significantly from Western culture and the culture differs within the various African tribes. Due to the influence of the colonisers, especially the British, Africa has become home to their culture as well. This brings in the concept of binarism which aids in the construction of culture with respect to the African society. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines 'binary' as 'relating to, composed of, or involving two things.' For example, light can be described as the absence of darkness and black is described as that which is not white. Due to the coexistence of two different cultures, this novel contains many instances of cultural binarism. The very act of writing about a society that has its roots in oral literature and using English to talk about a non-English speaking community is, in a way, an act of cultural binarism. Achebe presents the binarism within the Ibo community, within the British, and between the two cultures.

Discussion

Cultural binarism can be seen within the Igbo community with reference to their attitude towards violence. Achebe shows the Igbos awareness about violence that exists in their society. Okonkwo violates the rule of Week of Peace by hitting his wife. He was asked to pay a fine after which Ezeudu, one of the oldest men in the village, said:

In the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoiled the peace which it was meant to preserve. (29)

This change is a welcome one and shows how the Igbos changed a few violent traditions that they followed for a long time even before the colonisers came and 'civilized' them. However, some violent practices continued to persist. A significant event is that of Ikemefuna's killing. By taking the boy from Mbaino for killing the daughter of Mbata, just to kill him later obstructs the peace they meant to preserve and renders the very principle futile. For a significant change to occur, people must understand that cultural change is not the same as cultural decay.

Okonkwo and his son Nwoye – Stand for the Tradition and Change

Okonkwo and his son Nwoye stand for the tradition and change that is seen in the Ibo society. Okonkwo represents tradition as he holds the conventional ideas of masculinity, bravery, rank and reputation in high esteem. However, in due course, Okonkwo's fame starts dwindling and his decline signals the crumbling of the Umofian values and tradition. His obsession with masculinity drives him to kill Ikemefuna which impacts Nwoye in a large way. This, in addition to the killing of newly born twins, leads him to question the conventional values and urges him to convert to Christianity, a religion that treaded on the path of peace.

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Cultural Binarism

The way Okonkwo ended his life is also an example of cultural binarism. Okonkwo's death is tragic as it happened due to the insulting and unjust treatment of the white men and it is also an outcome of his frustration at the unwilling nature of his people to take on the white men violently. Okonkwo, who had adhered to the rules of the community all his life to the extent of even killing Ikemefuna, defied the sacred law of the clan – no one has the right to take their own life – in the end.

Cultural binarism is also brought out by the gender discrimination seen in the society. It is seen in the distinguishing of crops and sins as male and female, where male is a sign of intensity and female stands for tenderness. The male takes authority of the house while the female looks after the household.

His mother and sisters worked hard enough, but they grew women's crops, like coco-yams, beans and cassava. Yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop. (22)

Male – Female Crimes

The classification of crimes into male and female, the former being more grievous and punishable than the latter, is brought out in Ezeudu's funeral where Okonkwo unwittingly kills Ezeudu's son.

The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years. (117)

In both the cases, the female is relegated to a lower position. However, there are instances in the novel that emphasize the importance of female. Uchendu, Okonkwo's uncle, tells Okonkwo about the importance of motherland and women, by extension. When Okonkwo considers it below his dignity to stay in the land of his mother, Uchendu says, "Mother is Supreme." He also goes on to say that

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he seeks refuge in his motherland. (126)

While the tribe does degrade men by calling them 'agbala' meaning 'woman', which is used as an insult, an instance in the novel where a woman is portrayed as equal to man is when Ofoedu announces Ndulue's death to Okonkwo and Obierika, upon which the latter remarks,

It was always said that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind...He could not do anything without telling her. (64)

Binarism and Christianity

Binarism is also seen within Christianity (coloniser's religion) and in their perception of the Igbos. The misperception of "the other" works both ways. The Africans perceive the white missionaries to be 'foolish' and the colonisers view the Africans as 'heathens'. This racial discrimination is portrayed through the words of Reverend James Smith, the successor of Mr Brown. He openly expressed his contempt for Mr. Brown's policy of compromise and "saw things as black and white" (174) where black represents evil. This is in stark contrast to the principle of equality that Christianity sought to promote.

Binarism in Ideology

Binarism in ideology is exhibited when the colonisers kill far more than the Igbos. This is seen in their act of retaliation of wiping out the village of Abame for killing one white man. Igbos consider it an abomination to kill a member of the clan. When an outcast killed the sacred python, one of the men of Mbanta said that it was not their custom to fight for their gods and left the perpetrator unharmed. However, when Ajofia, an egwugwu, burnt the church, the District Commissioner reacted violently and tortured the leaders of the clan.

The Igbos and the Christians considered each other irrational. To the Christians, the idea of worshipping wooden idols seemed incomprehensible, whereas the Igbos thought it was crazy that God had a son but not a wife. However, despite these differences, both the systems believed in one supreme God who had messengers on earth – Christ for the British and the wooden gods for the Igbos.

While the difference of opinion exists between the cultures, Mr Brown and Akunna can be seen as a representation of the possible peaceful coexistence of both the Igbo and British. Both are willing to learn and listen to the beliefs and views of the other community even without giving in to the other, all the while defending their own cultures.

Conclusion

Achebe, though depicts the dichotomy within both the cultures, does not portray any community as wholly evil. Both the Igbo and the British represent the various kinds of human characteristics. While one may embrace modernity, it is important to remember one's history and to carry forward the positive things from one's culture and heritage.

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