

FRACTURED CONSCIOUSNESS, INTERNAL DISSENSIONS AND SOCIAL FAULTLINES IN ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract: Although the history of colonialism is not new as states with more military prowess and expansionist outlook have always acted belligerently and without any temperance, yet the discourse on Colonial Empires and the abuses related thereto, emerged as a separate discipline in Academia and intellectual circles only from 1980s and 1990s onwards. This discipline encompasses for analysis, the Colonial rule, concomitant exploits and the natives' response to the grand narratives enunciated by their colonial masters and western writers. It is against this backdrop, the present research paper attempts to highlight the anticolonial discourse in Africa and delve into the concept of reversion to the golden and glorious past which the African poets and writers espouse, with special reference to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: Metropolis, colonia, cultural resistance, Scramble for Africa, Ideological State Apparatus, Apocalypse, chimeric presupposition, disjointed social structure, gore, obanje, egwugwu, oppositional binary.

In the ancient past Greek and Roman Empires emerged as the most powerful forces of all times, subsuming within their pale a large expanse of territory. In Roman Empire, Rome was considered as the center of vast empire and known as 'Metropolis' in relation to the other newly annexed states known as 'Peripheral States'. In order to assert authority and consolidate its new acquisitions, Roman Empire is, unmistakably, the first political entity to introduce the system of 'Colony' which was essentially the allocation of vast stretches of landed estates or 'colonias' in Peripheral States to veteran Roman soldiers as a reward for their unimpeachable service. Likewise the Persian empire founded by Cyrus, the Great around 550 BC was a formidable force to be reckoned with, consisting within its sway, modern day Iran (Persia), Egypt, Turkey, and parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

However, the term colonialism in the Postcolonial studies confines itself to the political and economic domination by the various European powers from 16th Century onwards focusing more on the 19th and first half of the 20th Century when process of colonialism intensified after the industrial revolution in Europe. It was during this period when European powers vied with each other for cheap raw material, cheap labour and big markets for absorbing their surplus goods. This interdependence between the capitalism and colonialism is symbiotic and also intertwined. The process of colonialism does not make the subjugated countries only politically subservient but also causes irreparable damages to the native industries, economy, religious composition, and above all the cultural heritage of the colonies. Africa, for instance, has been brazenly exploited by the colonizers through the abominable practice of slave trade till it was abolished in 1830. Until this time, the European powers were confined only to the fringes of Africa and the African hinterland at large, remained an untouched and unexplored territory. It was only after 1870s when France and Belgium penetrated through the interiors of African continent, a fierce competition began among European nations popularly termed as 'Scramble for Africa'. The concomitant internal feud among Western powers resulted in summoning the Berlin Conference (15 Nov 1884- 26 Feb 1885) under the mediation of Otto Von Bismarck. It was during this 'infamous' conference that the continent of Africa was neatly parceled out among major European powers. Ironically, Berlin Conference did not have even a single representative from the continent of Africa whose fate was purportedly being determined by the Europeans. 'Scramble for Africa' was camouflaged under the garb of 'civilizing mission' directed at enlightening the 'savages' of Africa. Postcolonial writings are, therefore, an attempt to strike at this mainstay of colonial discourse and dismantle the very structure of cultural imperialism.

The emergence of postcolonial studies as a specific discipline is only a recent development. One of the major reasons behind it, is the political freedom of many colonies in the mid 20th century. Post-colonial with a hyphen signifies the changes in the realm of political, economic, cultural and social which came about after the colonial masters had withdrawn their control and suzerainty over the colonies and declared them as free and independent states. The other term Postcolonialism, refers to, on the other hand "the modes of reading and political analysis of colonial structures, historiography of colonialism,, cultural resistance, cultural nationalism and voices of dissent against colonial hegemony". (Sinha 291).

It has been a proclivity of western authors to foreground the colonial discourse as underpinnings to their claim of supremacy and civilizational greatness. This belief is further bolstered by the intellectual discourse initiated by Plato and Aristotle wherein the people from the Orient were written off as simply a foil to the cultured, masculine, brave and intellectually superior westerners. So the East and West have been discussed by western intelligentsia as a set of oppositional binary where each constitutes a distinct cultural identity. As Rudyard Kipling puts it in his famous poem “The Ballad of East and West”, “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet”. It is against this idea of distinctive and pure cultural identity, Homi Bhabha has posited his theory of cultural hybridity and mimicry.

While the European powers grossly exploited the valuable resources and siphoned off huge amount of money to their mother countries, they did so under the garb of a civilizing mission. And it was not accomplished only through their military might but rather accompanied religious missionaries made the process all the more easy and quick (as in case of Africa). Besides, from that position of hegemony, a discourse was also created which extolled the knowledge, power and civilizational achievements of the Europe. Since this discourse originated from the position of power and authority and was written with so much conviction and emphasis that it made even the natives skeptical of their own heritage. Natives were systematically educated in English language fed on the noxious premise that Europeans were at the Pinnacle of their civilizational advancement and their rule would usher the colonies too in the era of economic growth and human progress in near future. Hence the colonial discourse began acting as ideological state apparatus, as Althusser would put it, convincing the natives that their well-being lies in the larger good of the Empire. As Achebe shares his childhood experience in his article “African Literature as Restoration of Celebration”-

“I took sides with the white men against the savages. I was of the party of the white man in his hair-raising adventures and narrow escapes,...But a time came when I reached the appropriate age and that I was not on Marlow’s boat steaming up the Congo in Heart of Darkness. I was one of those strange beings jumping up and down on the river bank, making horrid faces. Or if I insisted on the boat side then I had to settle perhaps for that improved specimen as Conrad sarcastically calls him.” (7).

Said in his seminal work ‘Orientalism’ deliberates extensively on the aspect of this ‘otherness’. He builds upon his theory citing example of Napoleon Bonaparte who took along with his military troops an army of scientists and botanists to study the ‘otherness’ of the exotic flora and fauna of Egypt during his Egypt expedition. In an interview with Palaver, Achebe attempts to impress upon his compatriots that culturally as well as spiritually “Africa was not a vacuum before the coming of Europe, that culture was not unknown in Africa, that culture was not brought to Africa by the white world...we too had our own history, traditions, cultures, civilizations” (7). While posing a challenge, aiming at dismantling the grand narrative of occidental supremacy, the writers from the erstwhile colonies suggest the means for decolonising their states of political, cultural, economic and social vestiges and more so from the mental slavery and subjugation. These writers from Africa, Caribbean, India and other colonies also suggested to reorganize and run the state by returning back to the ideals of Pre-colonial era. These writers and thinkers see the ancient past as a period of glory, cultural excellence and flawless social setup.

Writers like Chinua Achebe flag this chimeric presupposition by problematizing the very notion of perfection, social harmony and cultural excellence which Pre-colonial Era purportedly represent. When Chinua Achebe published his classic *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Nigeria was poised on the threshold of political freedom and a debate was raging on about the most suitable political, economic and educational system to be incorporated. Through this novel, Achebe allows people to get a peek into the fictional narrative of pre-colonial Igboland from 1875-1904. Narrator in the novel does not take any side and presents an objective, matter-of-fact description of imaginary world of Umuofia. Achebe borrows the title from Yeats’s prophetic poem “The Second Coming”. To underscore the influence of Yeats’ poem on the narrative, Achebe uses the first four lines of the poem as ‘epigram’ appended to the novel. Prophesying an impending transition where the culture ‘red in tooth and claw’ would replace the existing culture, Yeats’ poem generates a sense of anarchy, gore and tumult which would invariably be the fall out of this change.

Taking a cue from this, Achebe strives to conjure up a fictional world punctuated with proverbs, folktales and fables, whose traditional values, beliefs and close-knit kinship system would tumble down with the onset of British culture. Through this novel, Achebe also attempts to pose a befitting rebuttal to Conrad’s novel *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Carey’s novel *Mister Johnson* by presenting an African world based on traditional values, societal mores and order. Besides Achebe also wants to draw the attention of the policy makers, statesmen and also the common tribesmen to the fault lines that undermined the African world and led to the much dreaded catastrophe. In an essay ‘The Novelist as Teacher’ Achebe unequivocally defines his role a writer, “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" (45).

Umuofia is a group of nine villages, comprising of Igbo tribe. It is founded on the principles of strict social norms. Anybody breaking the tribal customs was dealt with, irrespective of one's social status and wealth. For instance, during peace week, no body was allowed to commit any violence. Likewise committing an 'agbala' offence like killing someone inadvertently would invite excommunication and banishment from village. Anybody tempering with tribal customs and rituals was not spared.

In this African community, emphasis was laid on hard work and manly virtues. Tribesmen could move up and down the social ladder irrespective of their lineage or class. Bonds of kinship in this community are strong and could withstand the vagaries of time. Uchendu, Okonkwo's maternal uncle helps Okonkwo sustain his most trying time with his unconditional and most timely support. Inhabitants of Umuofia are ingenuous and forthcoming by nature. They are good at forming bonds of everlasting relationships. Okonkwo, during three years of Ikemefuna's stay becomes a doting guardian to him. Bonhomie and friendship are highly revered along with other virtues such as physical strength and courage. Besides the elaborate societal mores, people were affectionate and welcoming towards their guests. They would shower their hospitality through a system of an elaborate unwritten code entertaining them with kola nuts, crocodile pepper, vegetable soup, yam pottage, egusi soup, yam foo foo and palm wine served in drinking horns. There was also an elaborate process for choosing bride. To protect a bride from harassment at her husband's house, a certain amount was fixed as bride price. Besides Igbo community also loves spontaneous music and dance which are essentially the markers of a rich and mature culture.

Furthermore, a judicial system was also in place. Though it was primitive and regressive to certain extent, but village elders assembled together and handed down justice. The justice delivered here or by 'egwugwu' was final and binding to all. By foregrounding these community traits of peaceful, organic, quaint and orderly existence in the novel, Achebe attempts to subvert the Marlow's view of Africans as 'savages', 'frenzied men in a madhouse' and a sum total of stamping feet and dancing limbs. He also wants to instill, in the minds of his brethren, the dignity, self respect and also pride in their rich cultural traditions. In his article "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" Achebe writes, "The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing in human terms what happened to them, what they lost" (8). It was not by sheer serendipity that White man happened to dominate African landscape in a short period of time. They came with a well thought out strategy and proceeded cautiously with their policy of 'carrot and stick'. As Obierika puts it, "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 clans can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (160).

In fact Achebe through this novel launches a counter-offensive at western authors such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Carey. He challenges the very notion of white man's supremacy by juxtaposing it against the systematic and rustic bliss of Igbo community. The British administration is alluded to, using the imagery of leper and locusts which signify the predatory nature of it. Like leprosy, which spreads very rapidly and wastes away the bodies of the afflicted person, British administration has the same deleterious effects on colonies. The 'much admired' colonial judicial system is also put to ridicule by showing the British officials steeped into corrupt practices. As narrator in Chapter 20 comments, "They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance" (123). Court verdicts were also delivered in favour of those who "had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter" (124). The penalty of two hundred bags of cowries which Umuofia had to pay for release of their leaders, is changed to two hundred bags by the avaricious court messenger. It brings to the fore the disconnect between the masses and the British administration which translates into more exploitation of the common people.

Fault lines

The Yeats' prophetic poem 'The Second Coming' not only forebodes the arrival of a sinister civilization with upturned values, anarchy, chaos and confusion but also insinuates at the reasons behind this change. He vividly delineates through powerful imagery, the disintegration of an already established, settled order of things. 'Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world' and 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned' not only because of some extrinsic forces but because 'centre cannot hold' the things together. Achebe's Igbo world in *Things Fall Apart* can be construed as an archetype based upon the apocalyptic idea proffered by Yeats wherein many stresses such as internal dissension, eroding human values, regressive customs and resentment arising therefrom, disjointed social structure culminate into debilitating and

eventually falling apart of the Igbo society. Achebe attempts to put the spotlight on these fault lines which need to be taken special care of while conceiving post-independent Nigeria. Internal tensions which proved perilous in the past and may again raise their ugly head jeopardizing the newly found freedom in future.

Igbo society delineated in the novel, is steeped deep in superstitions and regressive customs and rituals. The birth of twins is believed to be aberrant and portentous; villagers get rid of twins by throwing them in 'evil forest'. Innocent children (such as Ikemefuna) could be butchered in cold blood, unscrupulously, on the advice of oracle/priestess of 'Agbala'. Nwoye nurtured a grudge against his father Okonkwo for having put an end to Ikemefuna's life who was like an elder brother and a mentor for Nwoye. This resentment was not only directed at his father but also at the irrational tribal customs and rituals. Stillborn babies or children repeatedly dying in infancy were labelled as 'obanje' and their bodies after mutilation would be thrown into the 'evil forest'. These inhuman practices alienated many villagers such as Nwoye, mothers of twins or stillborn babies or Ekwefi whose only child Ezinma was taken by Chielo, the priestess in the dead of night. In an interview with Ernest and Pat, Achebe expresses his revulsion with mindless tribal rituals

“There were certainly faults in the Ibo system that was depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. There is no reason, for instance, for twins to be thrown away. But if you take a position for or against, then you find yourself defending the throwing away of twins or else you say that Africa is barbaric, which appears to be the new trend today among some black writers, and they are immediately applauded by whites because it gives them an easy conscience again after all this period of doubt” (23).

The tribal society in the novel, is fraught with internal acrimony and clashes. The tribes clash, the villages clash sometimes resulting in carnage and bloodshed. Mbaino and Umuofia are often at daggers drawn and murder of a Umuofian woman is avenged by taking a virgin and a young lad Ikemefuna from Mbaino. Judicial system of the village is marred with primitive practices. The spirits of ancestors known as egwugwu were invoked; the people of the clan masquerading as spirits, one for each villages of Umuofia, would hand down the justice. Patriarchy and polygamy were the order of the day. Okonkwo has three wives, each having her own obi. As a veritable patriarch, he rules his household with an iron hand.

Furthermore, the life of a human being seems to hold little value. The outcasts or Osus were confined to an earmarked area in the village. This forbidden caste was not allowed the human dignity and respect. These people were embraced by Whiteman's faith and helped the British to consolidate their hold in Umuofia. No man in the clan was allowed to touch or bury the body of a man who kills himself. It clearly demonstrates a clan's antipathy towards their brethren who fell on bad times. It is heart wrenching to see that a leader like Okonkwo is disowned by the clan towards the end of the novel. Obiriaka's remarks on Okonkwo's death is quite poignant- “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” (187). The life of a celebrated hero at the end of the novel turns out to be only worth of 'a chapter' or 'a paragraph' in District Commissioner's book ironically entitled “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger” (188).

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