

Dichotomy of 'Being' and 'the Other': Chinua Achebe's, 'Things Fall Apart'

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Abstract

One's cultural and ethnic identity is maintained by one's first language. It expresses one's myths, proverbs, folktales and even history of one's culture and heritage in the language. It may be one of the reasons that the imperial powers tried to hallmark the native languages with their own and used of language as a key tool to impose their power and control over the colonised. There seemed two ways for the natives to fight back- one being of rejection and the other of subversion. Then of course there was the third option-to write back in the language of the Coloniser with the motive to reach out and appeal to the masses across the globe about their plight. The challenge, however, was to keep their essence, their identity alive in the language of majority. This paper makes an attempt to express the individual identity of Igbo which the colonialist had tried to suppress and take over through *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe.

Keywords: Achebe, identity, colonized, other, cultural.

Introduction

In the African Trilogy, the language of the coloniser is used to express the Igbo experience of that colonisation. However, the idioms, proverbs and imagery of these books invoke the Eastern Nigerian culture forcing the narrative in the terms of the narrative as expressed in the books and the told story.

These are the words spoken by Chinua Achebe, a post-colonial writer, novelist and critic who personally believed that it was the oppressed class alone that could uplift itself from its misfortunes and hardships that it encountered. It has been only a while since we have seen post-colonial writers and critics come up and give a voice to the unfortunately oppressed ones. In fact, it wasn't until the late 1990's that post-colonial criticism emerged as a distinct category. With writers like Homi. K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, the field gained immense popularity and name. More than Post-Colonialism emerging as a popular field and a lot of the writers gaining immense popularity by sharing their stories, the very fact that the voiceless received a voice, the oppressed found representation in these works- especially when the writer was the 'Other' himself, is what was celebrated.

Post-oppression and colonialism this seemed impossible as hardly anyone was educated enough to share their experiences in the language of the majority. For those who were educated out of their greed and expectation of favor from the colonizers, they were mostly on the colonizer's side. The problem, however, remained that until the 'Other'- the subjugated wasn't going to get a voice for itself and by itself to express their real-life experiences, the pain and suffering that they confronted could never be voiced in the truest sense. At the time of oppression, a genuine change in the life of the oppressed or representation for the subjugated seemed almost impossible. Slowly, as time progressed, the oppressed were entitled to be educated and it is then that they decided to raise their voice and speak for themselves.

A major book that in a way can be said to have inaugurated post-colonial criticism was Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). Not only did *Orientalism* expose the Eurocentric universalism that was prevalent during the time which took the superiority of the Western or European nations for granted, but also exposed the current standing of the East as the one inferior to the West, an 'Other' to the West. The 'Orient' or the 'Other' was considered as a sort of surrogate and underground self and every time they tried to engage in a discourse or discuss at length their plight with the rest of the world, the West would use influential terms of racial considerations and speak of them as the 'exotic race' rather than with the aspects of individual status or circumstance.

Many writers, critics and philosophers have commented on this very thought and its counterpart experienced their life's tales as well. One such philosopher is Jacques Derrida. In his book, *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of*, he begins by communicating that he has ... "*only one language, though that is not his*". He further exclaims that never in his life or in death will this language be his. He talks about the French language (that he calls as one that is not a foreign language) that is reflected as one being very near and dear to him and questions the apparent truth of what he has said about the language being very near and dear to him. He further goes to suggest two contradictory yet explicit propositions;

"... we only ever speak one language....we never speak only one language..."²

After some suggestions and further arguments placed by Derrida we get a clear picture of what he seems to be saying;

"... we only ever speak only one language, (yes, but)...we never speak only one language..."³

Now we get a much clearer idea of what he seems to be saying. This according to him is the only and very important law of translation. In relation to this, he goes on further to make a suggestion and further deduction that does the above statement mean that there is nothing but plurilingualism? Finally, however, he settles the matter and he comes with the clear explanation that one may know many languages, one may be a bilingual but it will be only in one language, that single language that one speaks, in which, one will truly be able to explain his purest of the feelings and experiences comfortably and involuntarily; truly only that 'language' could actually be called his. What he means to say is that whatever the language a person speaks, it's the subjects spoken in that language that should be true and pure-then only that language that will be spoken can be in a way called his 'language'.

If the very said statement by Derrida is applied in post-colonial terms, we get a perfect solution to the problem of the 'Other' not being represented or being unheard. There would be a true representation, as the very person who has experienced all the pain, misery and all the hegemonic practices would speak of the very truth and the truth alone. Now, this would be in the true sense a writing back against the hegemonic practices of the colonizer. Though nothing in the world would ever be able to compensate for all what the 'Other' had to undergo or experience, writing back by the 'Other' would be a true representation of their words. When it did begin to happen, most communities suggested and even proclaimed that it surely mean a lot to them and brought them some peace.

The very fact that their voice was being heard meant a lot to the community that was subjugated. The very hope that it could even lead to perhaps some steps being taken collectively by various people of other nations to supplement the development of the place or homes of the 'Other', the education of the children of the 'Other' and perhaps some employment brought a ray of hope in the hearts and minds of the people of the community.

Chinua Achebe was a well-known Nigerian critic, novelist and poet who was best known for his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, that was published in 1958. Born and brought up in an Igbo town called Odigi, (in south-eastern Nigeria) he lived and experienced all the stories that his sister told him in young age about his past, his culture and his true Igbo essence. As time progressed, he comprehended the situation of his community and the backwardness of his belonging. His experience of being subjugated, the poverty, hesitancy and illiteracy that befell them later led to an extensive loss of life, property and a sense of belongingness in his life and family.

Being educated and well-read, Chinua Achebe later decided to give a voice to all the Igbo people and write of all their colonial experiences and the effect that it left on the community. *Things Fall Apart* didn't come very easily as far as the book and the publication was concerned, but with time, all was well and the book gained a lot of popularity and a huge fan following. The protagonist, Okonkwo, his three wives and their children, their cultural and traditional practices (i.e. the fights, the belts and shields that they received depending on their strength and respect), their religious practices and societal norms are in fact all true reflections of the Igbo community.

When discussing his experience of writing the book, he states that the process of writing in English was indeed very difficult and awkward for him. The baggage that he was carrying could never be perhaps represented in the true sense in English but by using the little things in the novel like vocabulary from his Igbo language, the tales and Igbo connotations, names, idioms and cultural significations, he was able to successfully give a very individualistic yet Igbo feel to the novel and the readers reading it.

On reading the Igbo words like *obi*, *kola*, *gome*, *chi* that represent the Igbo community and culture within the text, a great excitement among the readers with a blast of new and colorful meanings and cultural connotations is experienced. The plot in itself is a triumph in itself, as far as delivering the Igbo successfully to the reader is concerned. The plot revolves around Okonkwo who unlike his coward father was a very strong and fearless individual, a well-respected individual and a man of his word. As the story progresses, we gather that due to an unfortunate event he has to face an exile of seven years from his village. It is when he returns to his village

from the exile that he finds certain 'white' people in his village. They seemed to have influenced people and made them follow their religion and culture. He is heart-broken and shocked at the plight of his people and community and cannot believe what he sees.

Okonkwo soon realizes that by showing sympathy to the weak and in the name of Christian missionaries, the white had started to interfere within his community and perhaps even began to take control of the workings of his people. Okonkwo becomes furious and wants to get to the bottom of the situation this immediately. But before he can do anything about it another unfortunate event takes place- a white man is killed by one of the shots fired from his gun. Okonkwo knows that the people of Umuofia have changed and would not fight to protect him and understand the true intent of his action. The next day when a white man comes to take him for the trial, he finds that Okonkwo has committed suicide and hung himself. Okonkwo's action is strictly against the Igbo culture and community but he is left with no other way as he doesn't want himself to be tried or killed or for that matter punished by the white. Okonkwo at the end also succumbs to the 'white', like his community.

In order to represent the true Igbo, Chinua Achebe employs the use of a variety of animal anecdotes in his novel as the Igbo often do in their language to denote the environment they live in and to naturalize their rituals. The novel discusses stories and myths at length-for instance about how the tortoise's shell became bumpy which is understood in terms of reasonable rationalizations within the Igbo community. The use of the image of the 'sacred python' is also another symbol used in the novel that has a very important role to play in the story. It is used to signify the struggle of transition between the traditions and change and its effects the very characters in the novel. Achebe employs the use of the symbolism of Enoch's suspected killing and the successive consumption of the python. In the novel, it is seen as the transition to a new form of spirituality and a new religious order. The conflict between the colonialists and the indigenous people is very well portrayed by Enoch's disregard of the sacred python and the Igbo community's respect and veneration for it.

A reading of the book gives the readers an experience of the true reflections of the Igbo community and its past in its purest form available, therefore, bringing to light the true essence of the Igbo community. The image of the 'locusts' descending upon the village is seen as an allegorical representation of the advent of the Christian missionaries and colonists who come to take over the Igbo community. Another very relevant symbol discussed in synonymy to the protagonist is 'fire'. Okonkwo is compared to a flame or fire most of the times alluding to his anger and character build. In fact, anger is to a large extent the only emotion that he displays in the entire novel. At the end of the plot too, it is his anger that feeds on him and he does succumb to his rage at the end by killing himself. This angst has also been considered as a parallel to that experienced by the community and the people of the community as part of their colonial experience.

The very purity of the cultural practices and thought that the plot reflects, confirms Derrida's point, i.e. the language represented by the 'Other' is without doubt the purest form of representation and is the 'language' that could be best employed to give the 'Other' a voice. Reading the novel brings very clearly and in its true essence, the culture of the Igbo community and traditions. There couldn't have been any other way that the novel could have been represented any better and all the credit goes to Chinua Achebe who provides a very

true yet local flavor to the book. This is perhaps also the reason why the book gained such popularity and respect. If this novel would have been written by any other person outside the Igbo community, it wouldn't perhaps have been a true reflection at all and would have denied the readers of its true Igbo essence as it wouldn't have been written justly with the perspective of the 'Other'.

Coming back to Derrida, however, the problem that he suggests is that the master, the writer of a specific book for instance cannot maintain his language similar to the very fact that he can't maintain any dealing of the land or identity that is natural or congenial as he can give meaning to this appropriation only in the progression of an 'unnatural process of strange political constructions', because language is not his natural ownership, that which he imposes to be his own. He concludes by saying,

"...anyone should be able to declare an oath...I have only one language and it is not mine, my own language is for me, a language that cannot be assimilated..."⁴

However, monolanguage remains incalculable according to him, thus raising the question of how to keep a language intact or alive? A very important point that he expresses is that whether we like it or not, we need to and as a matter of fact have to learn the language of the masters of capital and machines, for survival. He makes a secret of Abdelkebir Khatibi public in his book stating that though his mother-tongue is a language other than French, the very use of French has made his mother tongue lose him. This he metaphorically explains with a memory from his childhood-he would call his mother his aunt and his aunt his mother, always calling one as the other.

Finally, in his book he then declares his language originally colonial. Derrida explains at length once again that he and in fact all of us speak only one language and we don't own it, in fact no one can ever. Ultimately, we all speak only one language truly since it returns to the 'Other', it exists inequitably always for the 'Other', from the 'Other' and sustained by the 'Other'. What Derrida that can be inferred finally from his book *Monolingualism of the Other, Or, The Prosthesis of Origin* is that there is no language that exists as 'the language', neither any idiom nor any dialect. So, in comparison therefore, the language of the 'Other' or for that matter our language being both unique and individualist remains 'a language' but not the 'Other' language.

Conclusion

What seems clear and well understood from Derrida's writing is the very fact that he tries to express the concept of individualism and the identity and seems to be suggesting that what each of us actually has is a variation or a unique version of each of our first languages and this is our primary language. Instead of being involved in the dichotomy of the language of the 'Being' and the 'Other' and which language of these languages is that which we belong to, we must accept our individuality and respect our language, our culture and maintain our individuality and separate identities.

What Achebe attempts to do in *Things Fall Apart* is to attempt to express the Igbo individual identity that the colonist had tried to suppress, control and take over. In the language of the masses, he manages to revive and spread the individualistic essence of his community and culture through his writing. Thus, in a way preserving his Igbo essence that is embedded in the language. In doing so, he also manages to preserve his true cultural identity in the sincerest sense, in the language that is, perhaps thoroughly his now.

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