



Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* - Is Savage a Savage?

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Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) deconstructs this myth of a savage by proving that society and culture did exist however primitive, that "Man" did exist, but was converted into a brute by the aggression of the French on the Nigerian soil. The process of humanizing the so called "animals" of Africa and bringing enlightenment to the world of Africans through the spread of Christianity, culture, and science by the West, was one of violence. Peace was brought about by mass slaughter, splitting up of the native community, uprooting of traditions, religion, language and elimination of tribes in the name of education. Hence Achebe picturises a perfectly cohesive society with its values, traditions, customs and religious leanings; a humane society which exhibits feelings of love, hate, violence, worship, marriage, recreation and earning from the land. It is a society with a past that Nigerians need not be ashamed of and Europeans need to take cognizance of) In an address to the conference on Commonwealth Literature held at Leeds University in 1964, Achebe declared:

I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one of a long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God's behalf delivered them. (Quoted by Phelps 331)

The choice of the title taken from Yeats's famous poem *The Second Coming* is not therefore without significance. When Yeats writes: "*Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*", he foresees the end of Christian civilisation. Achebe predicts the end of the traditional African society. To stretch the parallel a little further, it would mean an affirmation of the African civilisation which resembled the utopian Byzantine world of arts and nature in its proximity to nature and Mother Earth. The *Second Coming* of Christ as a horror vision of the

"rough beast" is ironically akin to the advent of the white missionaries and white administrators. They bring about the catastrophic end and disjunction of Umuofia and consequently of Okonkwo, the hero who stands for Africanness.

Things Fall Apart holds a special significance in colonial history, for it is history: the unravelling of reality seen through the eyes of the colonised and the sufferer. It is a representative novel, as Gilbert Phelps points out in his essay on "Two Nigerian Writers: Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka." It was realized, that "*Things Fall Apart* was in effect the archetypal African novel, in that the situation it describes—the falling of a traditional African rural society as a result of the coming of the white man, was a traumatic experience common to all the colonial or former colonial territories" (331). The opening sentence of the novel plunges the reader straight away into the heart of Umuofia with the introduction of Okonkwo and his wrestling skill, thereby marking the importance of the socio-cultural value system. His social achievements are summed up in the following words: He was a wealthy farmer, and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars. And so although Okonkwo was still young, he was already one of the greatest men of his time. (12) (Regarded as a man of action and highly esteemed for his physical strength and courage, Okonkwo is an antithesis to his father Unoka. Unoka is lazy, is perpetually in debt, loves music and hates the sight of blood. He is a man of gentle emotions and loves the "intricate rhythms of Ekwe and the Udu and Ogene." But the Ibo people have no place for such weaklings and social failures. Hence Okonkwo is afraid to reveal the finer emotions of sensitivity, love and feeling for fear of being considered a coward. His love for his daughter Ezinma and the hostage

Ikemefuna is masked by a rough and rugged exterior. He is obsessed with the idea of preserving his manliness in reaction against his father's effeminacy.

Farming is the main occupation. Hence land occupies a central place in their life. Land is solid and it gives them dignity. Ok-onkwo's social status is determined by the land he owns. Before the harvest, Umuofia has its festive season; a thanksgiving to Ani---the earth goddess. It is the feast of the new yam—a kind of New Year celebration, Huts and walls are scrubbed with red earth, women paint themselves with camwood, draw beautiful patterns with uli on their body, shave their head in designs and wear beads on their waist. Yam foo foo and vegetable soup is in plenty and a wrestling match accompanied with the beating of drums marks the end of the festival. Palm wine and kolanut are offered to the guests as a sign of hospitality and honour. They drink the wine in drinking horns usually kept in goatskin bags. The partaking of wine entails an elaborate ceremony. Achebe, the skilled craftsman, leaves out nothing. He writes:

The younger of his sons, who was also the youngest man in the group moved to the center, raised the pot on his left knee and began to pour out the wine. The first cup went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group drank, beginning with the eldest man. When everyone had drunk two or three horns, Nwakibie sent for his wives... Anasi was the first wife... She walked up to her husband and accepted the horn from him. She then went down on one knee, drank a little and handed back the horn. She rose, called him by his name and went back to her hut. The other wives drank in the same way, in their proper order, and went away. (23)

Such ceremonial details and more, and their fondness for proverbs, stories and folk tales add up to the picture of a society with a rich traditional and cultural heritage. Idioms, allusions and folk-lore point to a live oral tradition. Their socio-moral value system is self-sustaining.

The Oracle of the Hills and Caves is the final authority of justice on all social and political matters of the village. It represents their ancestral gods. Worshippers go to the Oracle with awe and reverence to know all about their future. Personal disputes are settled in public by the nine egwugwu, the judges. "It is communal self-criticism and relaxed and in the last resort we all want the same things:... at that level, we can say the community triumphs, and that it spreads its own light and reason" (Fanon 37).

Punishment follows the transgression of laws. Okonkwo is punished though not severely for beating his wife during the week of peace. But he is exiled from his home! and for committing a "female crime" by inadvertently killing a clansman when his gun explodes during the burial rites of Ezeudu.

Umuofia has its strange and irrational ways. Cheilo when possessed with the spirit of Agbala acquires superhuman strength carrying Ekwefi's daughter Ezinma on her back round the nine villages to the Oracle of Hills. With Ezinma on her back she disappears through a hole hardly big enough to pass a hen, chanting-"Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbala ekeneo-o-o! Chi negbu madu ub-ori ndu ya nato ya uto daluo-o-o!..."

Similarly Ikemefuna, the hostage, is killed as ordained by the Oracle, though he is loved by Okonkwo and calls him father. Surprisingly Okonkwo participates in his killing as he is afraid of being considered a weakling though he is filled with guilt and remorse for days after the incident. Okonkwo is incapable of compromise; of blending the "masculine" and the "feminine" within himself.

Again, if a woman gives birth to twins they are abandoned and left in the evil forest to die and so is a man afflicted with stomach ailment, for he is considered to be an abomination on mother earth. Unoka faces such a death. Such events are shocking to the rational mind. But Achebe weaves them so skilfully in the fabric of social framework that the reader accepts them with the same calm that the writer narrates them. Achebe is successful in juxtaposing conflicting values and actions within the accepted beliefs.

Okonkwo's exile is the turning point in the novel. With his downfall begins the disjunction of Umuofia. During his stay in Mbanta his friend Obireka brings news that Abame has been wiped out. He says, "After a few days a few white men came to the market place which was full and began to shoot. Everybody was killed except the old and the sick who were at home.... their d now completely empty" (129).

The white missionaries arrive in Mbanta and begin to educate the natives about the falsity of their own gods and religion. Ironically, it is Okonkwo's son Nwoye who is lured by their talk and becomes a convert.) Nwoye like his grandfather is the softer sort. Hence the missionaries attract him with their songs and prayers. "The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting

earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled" (137).

When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia the church has made its impact and there is a white man's government to judge cases against the natives. Some of the natives are imprisoned and subjected to the indignity of clearing the ground or fetching wood for the White Commissioner. The natives are men of title. They are pained and angered at such treatment. Others are hanged. In despair they sing:

Kotma of the ash buttocks, He is fit to be a slave the white man has no sense He is fit to be a slave. (161)

It is ironical that the white man in the eyes of the native is ignorant, foolish and high handed, hence fit to be a slave. Okonkwo's blood boils to hear incidents of assault on his kinsmen. But as Obierika explains, the white man has acquired power by dividing their clan, by driving them apart with his religion and turning their own kinsmen against one another. The white man has taken away their power to fight back. Obierika tells Okonkwo, "He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (162).

When the Christians desecrate the personal gods of the natives, they invite their wrath. Okonkwo and the leaders of Umuofia decide to demolish the church that has parted them. It results in their imprisonment and a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. Their stay in the prison is one of hunger, humiliations and insults. They are not allowed to go out to urinate, their heads are shaved and then knocked together by the court messengers. Okonkwo is filled with hate and vows to avenge his honour. He has survived personal failures: his exile, his son's treachery or the failure of crops. But when the very existence and dignity of his clan is threatened, he is ready for war. Seething with anger, he kills the court messenger who tries to disrupt their meeting. He seeks the support of his people, but they are divided and Umuofia backs out of war, unable to take action like Okonkwo. He is filled with despair. Umuofia has failed him. Rather than accept the white man's slavery, he decides to take away his life. His act is a crime against mother earth. Okonkwo's despair finds release only in death. His friend Obierika says ferociously to the District Commissioner who has come to arrest Okonkwo, "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." (191).

Okonkwo's death is recorded in the White Commissioner's book in a paragraph. The name of the

book is *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. This ironic note by Achebe and his cool objective one that he uses throughout, heightens the tragedy of Okonkwo. Okonkwo's death is the result of a dilemma that all natives face. "If he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he is a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself and he is no longer a man at all; shame and fear will split up his character and make his innermost self fall to pieces." (Sartre's "Preface" to the *Wretched of the Earth* 13).

The end of *Things Fall Apart* is a displacement of Ibo culture, language and traditions by the English language, religion and culture.) The process of colonisation has begun with the death of Okonkwo. The novel is a work of epic dimension in its magnitude of subject matter. It unveils the complete life history and tragedy of Okonkwo and consequently of the African tribe. *Things Fall Apart* resembles Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* in its vastness of human life history. Achebe adds life and vitality to the novel by introducing native usage in the English language. He thus pushes the frontiers of English language a little further, thereby adding another feature of postcolonialism to his writing.

One aspect of decolonisation takes into account the acceptance of guilt and self-introspection on the white man's part. Writers like Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* and Sartre are relentless in their incisive criticism of imperialism. But the imperialistic stand continues even today seen both in America's dictatorial policies on nuclear disarmament and the continued oppression and killing of Negroes in America. The latest Cosby murder case as reported in the *Times of India* dated 25th July, 1998 says,

African Americans as well as Americans are brainwashed every day to respect and revere slave owners and people who clearly waffled about race.

America's Educational Institution's Dictionaries define "black" as "harmful"; "hostile"; "disgrace"; "unpleasant" aspects of life. White is described as "decent", "honorable", "auspicious"; "without malice."

Sartre's scathing denunciation of colonialism should be an eye opener to the West. "First, we must face that unexpected revelation, the striptease of humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it's not a pretty sight. It was nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affection of sensibility were only alibis for our aggressions" (Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* 21).

Note

1. Viney Kirpal in her introduction to the *Post modern English Novel* has made a comprehensive survey of the Indian postcolonial scene where she discusses the various stands taken by postcolonial theorists. She writes, "Said—like Rushdie privileges the migrant writer and downgrades the idea of national literatures as ideological narrations." Critics who have rejected this claim are Aijaz Ahmad, Timothy Brennan, Revathi Krishanaswamy. Similarly T.N. Dhar in his essay "Historiographic Contest and the Post-Colonial Theory" in *Literature and Ideology* has taken the stand of Rushdie and Said to give the term a wider implication. He writes, "Coercion may not necessarily inhere in the methods of their adversaries, but in the ones which are a part of their cultural traditions and style."

References

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