



Things Fall Apart: A Reaction to Colonial Accounts of Africa

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Abstract

Things Fall Apart, first published in 1958, was the first novel by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. It presented an account of the time when colonial powers started creeping into the native societies and started destroying their culture in order to gain power and dominance. Acknowledged as a classic in the modern African Literature, it is a kind of counter discourse where the novelist has made an impressive attempt to reassert the native identity in its actual naked form. Set in Eastern Nigeria, the novel challenges the misrepresentations of the native by the writers of the so-called civilized western society. The colonial accounts of the native, even the most sympathetic ones, asserted that the society here has no organised system or culture. As outsiders, they are not able to delve deep into the local systems to comprehend the complexity of their community life. The present paper is a humble attempt to study the novel *Things Fall Apart* as a counter discourse in reaction to the colonial accounts of Africa.

All post-colonial literatures, as the editors of *The Empire Writes Back* rightly observe in the Introduction to the book, “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre.” (Ashcroft, 2) *Things Fall Apart* is no exception. Africa, as per the colonial portraits, emerges as something wild, barbaric, uncultured, chaotic and evil. Africans, untouched with the refined taste and knowledge gained in the process of development, was supposed to remain an uncivilized society without the colonial intervention. An African was not worth an identity or individuality. Frantz Fanon, in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, summarizes the

colonial account of the continent in the following words;

“Colonialism, which has not bothered to put too fine a point on its efforts, has never ceased to maintain that the Negro is a savage; and for the colonist, the Negro was neither an Angolan nor a Nigerian, for he simply spoke of ‘the Negro’. For colonialism, the vast continent was the haunt of savages, a country riddled with superstitions and fanaticism, destined for contempt, weighed down by the curse of God, a country of cannibals- in short, the negro country” (Fanon,170)

The colonial texts being adored and admired in academia, not able to dismantle, analyse and understand the complex webs of native societies, actually portrayed only the exteriors of

the African societies and landscapes. The colonial masters interpreted the African society according to Western ideologies and Christian philosophy. For them, Christianity means civilization and all paganism is savagery. Anything not in accordance with the Christian principles is nothing but savage. The complexity of compactly interwoven societies of Africa was unintelligible to the Western imagination. The continent was time and again seen through the glasses of the Western cultural ideologies and hence the picture remained distorted, oscillating between the excesses of romanticism and brutality. The colonial representations projected the native society as entirely devoid of any organised system or cultural refinement. In reaction to such presentations, the colonised reasserted their right to present an authentic picture of their own. *Things Fall Apart* gives the life of the colonised, an authentic representation, reasserting their culture, identity and dignity that had been lost during colonial period.

“African peoples did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans;[...] their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty [...] they had poetry and, above all, they had dignity. (Ojaide, 150)

The inherent racist tendencies in the colonial representations get reflected in the dark shades that the native African cultures were portrayed in, using negative terms. Even the so-called sympathetic accounts like one in the novella *Heart of Darkness* were not free from the colonial bias. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was a native's response to such accounts. In contrast to the Western representations of Africans as “one-dimensional characters”, Achebe insists “that Africans are a people who are neither angels nor devils.” (Ojaide, 150) The novel, published in 1958, is now considered a classic in the post-colonial studies. It is an expression of the native in the language of the colonial masters. Questions were there about the writer's choice of the language and in fact it was a challenging task to fairly express the colonized in the language of the colonizer. Achebe has chosen this language as through this language he can shatter the brutal image formed in the mind of the Western reader who cannot

understand the native language. The language that Achebe used may be a foreign language but the idiom is native, the rhythm, the narrative and the vocabulary are all native. With the use of the language of the imperial powers, Achebe has given himself a chance of a wider audience. The novel takes us to the pre-colonial Igbo society in an attempt to reclaim “African history from an African perspective, but it does so without romanticizing the African past” (O'Reilly,34) The writer's objective here is to present the native African culture and society from inside, before the onset of colonial rule and also to present a record of the gradual process of colonization of native culture and systems. The title of the novel itself hints towards a time when things existed together in an organized structure and with the intrusion of the colonial powers, things started falling apart. European colonialism had devastating effects on the diverse culture and traditions of the native societies. The colonial powers started with the expansion of their religion in these cultures and used it to expand their colonies. The missionaries started with questioning the relevance of native customs and beliefs and strategically uprooted them bit by bit. They equated the new religion i.e. Christianity with civilization and the native as a form of savagery;

“All the gods you have named are not gods at all. They are gods of deceit who will tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true god and he has made the earth, the sky and all of us.”(Achebe,103)

In comparison to the all-powerful Christian God, they rendered the native gods powerless;

“Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm. They are pieces of wood and stone.”(Achebe,103)

They tried to convince the natives that they have been sent by the actual God to save the latter. Through the novel, Achebe tried to regenerate the African past. He himself asserted that the aim of his writing is to teach his 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.”(Ashcroft, 125) As the author claimed, the novel presents the culture of the native Igbo society that existed

long before the colonial invasion. In the novel, Achebe has quite successfully resisted the natural temptation to idealize his own culture and has offered a realistic account of the society, before and after the arrival of colonial masters, without missing any of its flaws. The pre-colonial Igbo society that the novel begins with has complex but comprehensive systems, values and traditions. Afterwards the novelist traces the path where bit by bit these complex systems were disrupted and uprooted after coming into contact with the British.

Umuofia was an organic society with community based systems before the colonial invasion. In the first fourteen chapters the novelist describes the fears, emotions, customs, hardships and hurdles of the people but the solutions to their problems are all found within. Achebe's representation of Igbo is neither ideal nor nostalgic and succeeds in maintaining his objectivity. It's nowhere presented as some idyllic landscape. The religious system of the Igbo people follows a proper hierarchy. The supreme God Chukwo is not to be bothered with petty affairs. His work is concerned with the making of the heaven, the earth and the other small gods. Before any important decision, Igbo people consulted gods for permission and offered sacrifices to please them. Nobody is supposed to disobey their wishes conveyed through the oracles of the hills and the caves, called *Agbala*. The social status of a man is attained through his various achievements. The titles are won through actions. Those who are not able to win titles are considered feminine. The community values hard work and individual achievements. This also becomes one of the reasons of the rise of colonial powers there. Umuofia doesn't resist the outsiders because it believes in maintaining harmony. The natives assumed that the new people were not attacking anybody, but only trying to establish themselves, so no reason for war. This lack of resistance in the beginning results in an unstoppable growth of colonial powers.

Towards the end of the novel, the protagonist hangs himself. The one who 'was well-known throughout the nine villages and even beyond' during the pre-colonial phase, lost all of his respect and dignity with the advent of

colonial systems. He sees his beliefs and traditions dying before him. How could he keep on living as his clan and its traditions have always been more important for him than his own desires and emotions? Fear of failure has always haunted him. He himself joins the journey to the forest to kill Ikemefuna for 'The Oracle of the Hills and Caves has pronounced it...' (Achebe, 51) An oracle is one of the main cultural aspects of the pre-colonial society and Okonkwo respects it at all costs and is ready to part with his son-like Ikemefuna for the common good;

" 'my father, they have killed me!' As he ran towards him.

Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down." (Achebe, 55)

The traditions of the clan are to be followed even at the stake of the individual. Every member of the community is expected to work towards the general good of the community. This is in sharp contrast to the individualistic culture of the West and so completely incomprehensible to the Western reader. As the White man is not able to identify himself with this idea, he terms it barbaric and uncultured. But anything that's not a part of your culture is not necessarily away from the idea of culture. It has its own relevance and is an aspect of culture. Okonkwo is ready to part with his son to save his clan from calamity. Respecting the decision of his society and goaded by his fear of being called 'feminine', Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna who has always addressed him 'my father' and abandons his son, Nwoye and removes him from the family just because he has got himself converted. The act of killing Ikemefuna is certainly cruel and not justifiable, but we need to look into the motif behind that in order to understand the same. Also, this can be seen as parallel to the actions of those so-called civilized ones colonizing the land and insulting and killing the natives in the name of making them cultured and civilized.

Like every other religious system or society, there are dissatisfied people in Igbo society too. Those who suffer because of the native customs and beliefs — women with multiple births, albinos etc. — find a shelter in the foreign religion. It's really interesting that those who

advocate compassion and inclusion are themselves intolerant to others. Mr. James Smith, the missionary is of the view that all the pagans should be destroyed. He supports the converts to destroy the so-called pagans. The Christian can mock at the ancestral spirit of the natives 'egwugwu' and hurt their sentiments by tearing off the mask of the spirit, but it's unbearable if the elders retaliate the same, they are fined by the District Commissioner.

The natives believed in the concept of togetherness and acted as a whole. The writer has made full use of native proverbs and folktales to give an expression to the native in the language of the colonizer and hence is able to do full justice to the colonized. Nowhere has he seemed inclined to hide anything, be it the most horrible aspect of the society. But one cannot deny the fact that the society had its own community based system of law and governance, though not admitted by the colonial world. This society needed some reformation but certainly not the contempt and cruelty meted out to it by the colonial powers. Thus the novel *Things Fall Apart* can be seen as a counter discourse meant to reassert African identity as it is, in its naked form free from all kind of biases and prejudices.

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