
TRANSCENDENCE OF AFRICAN CULTURE AND EUROPEAN COLONIALISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract: The African literature in English has added a new dimension to the world literature today. It represents the colonial and post colonial crisis within Africa. Colonialism debilitated the natives on different levels: psychological, social, physical, political, sexual, cultural, racial etc. The echoes of various upheavals in Africa can be noted in African literature. John Maxwell Coetzee, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Ngugi Wa Thiong are some of the African writers who have dominated English writing with all its distinguished traditions of liberalism. The African literature comes to the forefront only from the period of colonization. In this period Africans came in close contact with western language and culture. In the colonial period African literature used to deal mostly with the themes of liberation and independence. With liberation and increased literacy African literature began to grow dramatically in quantity. In the post colonial period the African writers showed their interest in dealing with the themes of the clash between Africans past and present, between tradition and modernity, between individualism and community, between socialism and capitalism. The African literature in this period also deals with the themes of social problems such as corruption, the economic disparities in newly independent countries and the rights and role of women.

Keywords: Colonialism, Realism, Traditional Culture, Commitment

Surprisingly, the theme of transcendence of African tradition and modernity embodied by European colonialism had not received the kind of critical attention it deserves; the present researcher believes that this relationship can be studied at several levels. Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong's novels generally focus on the traditions of Igbo Society, the effect of Christian influence and the clash of western and traditional African values during and after the colonial period. The proposed study seeks to examine the theme of the transcendence of African culture and European Colonialism in Chinua Achebe's novels. Chinua Achebe: Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist, Poet, Professor and Critic. Achebe wrote his novels in English and defended the use of English, a 'language of colonizers' in African literature. His style relies heavily on the Igbo oral tradition and combines straight forward narration with representations of folk stories proverbs and oratory. While writing in English Achebe alters syntax, usage and idiom to transform the language into a purely African style. His novels such as *Things fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of Savannah* presents the encounter between African Traditional Culture and European Colonialism. *Things fall Apart* has been considered here for the study. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Chinua Achebe structured the title of the novel after the line in the poem "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats. In this novel Okonkwo struggles with the legacy of his father, a shiftless debtor, and fond of playing the flute as well as the complications and contradictions that arise when white missionaries arrive in his village of Umuofia. Exploring the terrain of cultural conflict, particularly the encounter between Igbo

tradition and Christian doctrine. *No Longer at Ease* (1960) In the year 1960 Achebe published his second novel *No Longer at Ease* which he dedicated to Christie Okoli. The novel is about a civil servant who is embroiled in the corruption of Lagos. The protagonist is Obi; grandson of *Things Fall Apart*'s main character, Okonkwo. Achebe writes in this novel about obi's experiences in Lagos to reflect the challenges facing a new generation on the threshold of Nigerian independence. Obi is trapped between the expectations of his Family, its clan, his home village, and larger society. He is crushed by these forces like his grandfather before him and finds himself imprisoned for bribery. Achebe demonstrated in this second novel an ability to depict modern Nigerian life. *Arrow of God* (1964) Achebe's third book *Arrow of God* was published in 1964. Like its predecessors, it explores the intersections of Igbo tradition and European Christianity. Set in the village of Umuaro at the start of the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of Ezeulu, a chief priest of Ulu. Shocked by the power of British intervention in the area, he orders his son to learn the foreigner's secret. As with Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Obi in *No Langer at Ease*, Ezeulu is consumed by the resulting tragedy. *A Man of the People* (1966) *Man of the People* was published in 1966. A bleak satire set in an unnamed African state which has just attained independence, the novel follows a teacher named Odili Samalu from the village of Anata who opposes a corrupt minister of culture named Nanga for his parliament seat. This novel was considered as the most important novel in connection with the Biafra movement. *Anthills of Savannah* (1987) In 1987 Achebe published his fifth novel *Anthills of Savannah*

about a military coup in the fictional west African nation of Kangan. Achebe here describes the political situation through the experience of three friends. The first expression of Igbo culture and tradition is depicted in the second chapter in the following words 'Darkness held a vague terror for these people, even the braves among them children were warned not to whistle at night for fear of evil spirits, Dangerous animals became even more sinister and uncanny in the dark. A snake was never called by its name at night, because it would hear. It was called a sting. And so on this particular night as the crivr's voice was gradually swallowed up in the distance, silence returned to the words. (Things Fall Apart: 5) In fact Chinua Achebe wrote Things Fall Apart in response to Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness in which Africa is treated as a primordial and cultureless foil for Europe. Here in this novel Achebe expresses the complex laws and customs of Okonkwo's clan and its commitment to harmonious relations. The custom of sharing palm-wine and kola nuts is repeated throughout the book to express the peacefulness of the Igbo. The following line clearly emphasizes the significance of this custom. 'As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies. (Things Fall Apart: 3) When Unoka's neighbor Okoye, visits him to collect the debt, Okoye does not immediately address the debt. Instead, he and Unoka share a kola nut and pray to their ancestral spirits; then they engage themselves in conversation about community affairs. The African customs regulating social relations express their common interest and culture. Okoye then introduces the subject of debt through a series of Igbo proverbs. 'Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten; (3). Thus Achebe very cleverly contradicts the European representations of Africans as savages in this novel. Okonkwo the protagonist of this novel expresses African tradition, customs and culture throughout the novel through his behavior and his reactions to the happenings in the novel. Sometimes his behavior causes tension within his family and his community. Okonkwo associates weakness with femininity. For him masculinity is the hallmark of African tradition and culture. A man is not believed to be manly if he cannot control his wife. Okonkwo beats his wives frequently. Once, Okonkwo beats his wife in the week of peace. It was unheard in the African culture to beat somebody during the sacred week. According to the custom he was punished. Though African traditional Igbo culture is patriarchal; it is democratic, and if somebody is not following the custom, he is surely given punishment. Ezeani, who was the priest of the earth goddess, Ani reacts to

Okonkwo's breaking the peace in the following manner.

"Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (Things fall Apart: 19)

The Igbo culture emphasizes the peaceful and harmonious relations within society. They always consult the oracle before declaring war the following lines exhibit briefly African traditional culture. 'The oracle was called Agbala and people came from far and near to consult it. They came when misfortune dogged their steps or when they had a dispute with their neighbors. They came to discover what the future held for them or to consult the spirits of their departed fathers. (Things Fall Apart: 10) Thus African culture tries to avoid violence and war on the interpersonal levels whenever possible. In the following words of Okonkwo the greatness of African culture reflects. 'As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness.' (Things fall Apart: 12) Africans believe in the chi or personal god. Igbo people have a proverb that 'when a man says yes his chi says yes also (17). The chi or the personal god allows men to connect some portion of their failures and successes to divine influence. This belief encourages respect among society. The individuals in the society are able to settle a dispute between the persons without resorting to personal attacks. Okonkwo accepts all of his clan's laws and traditions unquestioningly but in the matter of killing Ikemefuna, his actions seriously damage both his relationship with Nwoye and Nwoye's allegiance to Igbo society. Though Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna, he felt that he had followed the decision of the Oracle. Okonkwo replied to Obierika in the following words

"This earth cannot punish me for obeying her messenger. A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm."

(Things fall Apart: 47)

Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's sixteen year old son. In African tradition it was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. He could return to the clan after seven years. Achebe depicted African traditional culture in the matter of such killing in the following lines. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo. His greatest friend Obierika was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman.' (Things fall Apart: 91) Throughout the novel Achebe describes

African customs and social institutions which try its best to avoid war and violence and always respect a peaceful solution to any conflict. Uchendu Okonkwo's uncle therefore condemns the killing of the first White Man. According to him it was a foolish act and it was against African tradition to kill a man before even known what the man's intentions were. In the chapter sixteen of the novel we come to know that the White Missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there. They were also successful in converting some of the natives to Christians. This was a source of great sorrow to the leaders of the clan. The following line shows the impact of the White Missionaries coming to Mbanta.

'The Arrival of the missionaries had caused to considerable stir in the village of Mbanta'

(Things fall Apart: 103)

The White Missionaries tell the Igbo people that they are all brothers and sons of god. This faith and their religion weaken the kinship bonds which are central to Igbo culture. The Church and their religion are the biggest challenge in front of African cultural values and tradition. But following the custom Mbanta is committed to peace and remains tolerant of the church presence. The missionaries have adopted intolerable ways to expand their religion by disrespecting African religion in the following shameful way.

"All the gods you have named are not gods at all.

They are gods of deceit who tell you to kill your fellows and destroy innocent children. There is only one true god and he has the earth, the sky, you and me and all of us." (Things Fall Apart: 105)

When one man asks the missionaries if they leave their god; who will protect them from the anger of their gods and ancestors. The white missionary replied in the following words.

"Your gods are not alive and cannot do you any harm. They are pieces of wood and stone."

(Things Fall Apart: 105)

To this disrespect of their own gods and ancestors by the White Missionaries, the clan leaders remain silent and vote for a peaceful solution. Even when a convert has killed a royal python the clan leaders decide to ostracize rather than attack and kill Christians. Achebe further describes how the missionaries expand their status in Africa in the following lines: 'But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary. (Things fall Apart: 112) The Christians thus grown in number in days to come and then became a small community of men,

women and children, self assured and confident.

Umuofia had changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. Apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had also built a court where the district commissioner judged cases in ignorance. Okonkwo has dealt with the missionaries in Mbanta and he is now forced to deal with them in his own village. Achebe portrays colonialism effectively in his novel. He also presents through this novel the benefits of cross-cultural contacts and depicts the villager's delight in the hospital's treatment of illness. Reverend Smith disrespects traditional Igbo culture and this refusal causes a great deal of conflict between the church and the clan. In the last part of the novel we come to know that Okonkwo killed the messenger with his machete. This act expresses Okonkwo's bitter feeling about colonialism. Okonkwo cannot live his life forgetting his values and traditional way of life. This is the only reason why he commits suicide in the end. Okonkwo knew very well that it was an abomination for a man to commit suicide. It was against their custom. Still he did that act because it was unbearable for him to lead life in colonialism. European colonialism destroys African traditional culture and values. Obierika's ferocious words to district commissioner are enough to show this agony

"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." (Things fall Apart: 157)

Conclusion: Okonkwo who is a wealthy and respected warrior of Umuofia clan, which is a lower Nigerian tribe, fails bitterly to face European colonialism. He had a deep respect for his clan, and its religion custom, culture and tradition. Colonialism is intolerable for Okonkwo. He expects his fellow clan members to join him in uprising. Okonkwo kills their leader with his machete. When his clan members allow other messengers to escape; Okonkwo realizes that his clan members are not willing to go to war. Finally Okonkwo hangs himself. He cannot find any other way than this. Okonkwo has a deep feeling and respect for the aspects of African tradition and custom. Without these cultural values his life is like an unbearable punishment for him. That is why he commits suicide. It was Okonkwo's flaw in his character that he cannot handle the transcendence of African Culture and Tradition and European Colonialism. Okonkwo is just one representative of all those Africans who cannot handle this transcendence. Though Achebe has several other aims behind writing this novel; he has certainly achieved great success in depicting transcendence of African Culture and European Colonialism.

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