
RIGHTS TO LAND IN IGBO COMMUNITY IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

SWATILEKHA MAHATO

Abstract: Legendary Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's magnum opus "Things Fall Apart" (1958) influences us a great deal as a postcolonial text. Okonkwo is the protagonist of the novel, a great warrior of Umuofia clan in Nigeria. This Igbo community has a high regard for the land and they worship the landscape. Okonkwo's accidentally discharged gunshot killed a citizen of the land and for punishment the oracles ordered Okonkwo seven year exile from the land he loved so much, all his dreams associated with that land remain incomplete. His displacement from his fatherland to his motherland Mbanta, made him guilty of what he had done accidentally. He lost the opportunity of becoming a great leader of the clan. He was desperately waiting to go back to his own father land where he belongs, to get back his identity, honour, prosperity and respect from the people of his land. But after seven years exile Okonkwo came back to his Umuofia and the whole scenario changed. Land makes an important place in Ibo people's life. The white missionaries wanted to impose their power upon the land. They want to capture the land and settle in Umuofia. But the people could not save the land from the clutches of the white missionaries. One can claim the right to land where he actually belongs that is his fatherland. Uchendu, his uncle reminds him that a man belongs to his fatherland but when he is in bad times only motherland can rescue him. Okonkwo's story revolved around this historical background of British people's oppression on their native land and how he tangle with his pride of the land and the struggle to release the clutches of the white Missionaries. The aim of this paper is to show the Igbo community's close connection with their land, culture and nature. During his seven years exile, Okonkwo came with his family to his motherland to seek refuge. But he has to go back as a man's right always belongs to his fatherland, during bad time one can always take refuge in motherland to get consolation, support, and peace, but ultimately he has to come back to his fatherland, the land of honour, prosperity and duty.

Key words: post-colonial, rights to land and identity.

Introduction: "The land is the only thing in the world worth working for, worth fighting for, worth dying for, because it's the only thing that lasts"-Margaret Mitchell

This above line is quite truly said by Margaret Mitchell, She told us about our life long attachment towards land. Our identity related with our land where we belong. In this paper, I have chosen Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe's first novel "Things Fall Apart" (1958) which created and still maintaining a huge impact in world literature. The story is about European colonization of Africa (Nigeria) told from the viewpoint of colonized people at the end of nineteenth century. The novel narrates the life of tragic hero Okonkwo, a brave wrestler and leader of the Umuofia clan. He is masculine, strong, hardworking, respected wealthy farmer, well settled in his Umuofia clan, with many titles. He is quite famous as a 'greatest wrestler in the nine villages', he achieved all this with his own capability. He loves his fatherland very much. But the arrival of white missionaries in their land, changes everything.

The title of the novel derives from a line from William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" which visualizes the end of the world. Ironically, in the novel, the same situation came into the protagonist Okonkwo's life. The white people

invaded into their land, their encroachment hugely affected the people's life. Imperialism really had shaken their own string of unity in the community. Colonial rule destroyed their culture, belief system, value of tradition. Here 'white man' implies British colonialists who are the outsiders' slowly taking control and authority over the native people of Umuofia. The village peoples are perplexed and could not decide what to do with this present situation. They know very well that the white missionaries can never understand their clan's traditional sense of justice and Ibo culture. The native people are afraid of losing their religion, identity and culture of their beloved land. The white missionaries requested the village leaders and elders a piece of land on which they will build a church. They offer them a plot in the "evil forest" believing that the missionaries will not accept it. But in contrarily, the white missionaries were quiet happy to get that land. And they became successful to win some local people's trust. Day by day it became a serious issue and the village leaders were unable to do anything about it. Obierika, one of the leaders of the clan knew that the white man came here for a mission to capture their land and control the village people. But he also felt that their own brothers have no unity to fight back. The Umuofian peoples were also changing according to their present

situation. They were converted to Christianity against their own cultural values.

Every native people have their own rights to land. The white people invade their land forcibly, imposing their authority over the natives and destroying the village people's traditional values, culture and unity of the Igbo community in Africa. The white missionaries tried to convert the local people, they built churches, influences them to join with them. Okonkwo feared that they will lose their land because he believed that the clan peoples have no courage to fight back. The novel deals with the conflict between these two culture's violent transitions in life and values brought about by the onset of British colonialism in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. This Ibo community has a high regard for the land and they worship the landscape religiously. They value their tradition and follow it devotedly. But in his life a great twist came and his fate changed drastically. That one incident changes Okonkwo's whole life. He accidentally discharged gunshot killed a citizen of the land and for punishment the oracles ordered Okonkwo seven year exile from the land he loved so much, all his dreams associated with that land remain incomplete. According to their custom, he committed a sin against the land; he had to leave that place "It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land." (Achebe 117) 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. It was their custom in that community "His greatest friend, Obierika, was among them. They were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman." (Achebe 117)

After his banishment from the Umuofia land, Okonkwo tried to adjust in his motherland. He worked hard for the harvest and did well. Before going back to Umuofia Okonkwo gave them a great feast to his mother's kinsmen. He was genuinely grateful to them but inwardly waiting patiently to go back to Umuofia (fatherland). His displacement from his fatherland to his motherland Mbanta, made him guilty of what he had done accidentally. He lost the opportunity of becoming a great leader of the clan. He was desperately waiting to go back to his own father land where he belongs, to get back his identity, honour, prosperity and respect from the people of his land:

The seven wasted and weary years were at last dragging to a close.

Although he had prospered in his motherland Okonkwo knew that he would have prospered even more in Umuofia, in the land of his fathers

where men were bold and warlike. In these seven years he would have climbed to the utmost heights. (Achebe 153)

Land makes an important place in Ibo people's life. Those who are away from the land have no identity. Okonkwo's situation is like that away from his own land he lost his identity and honour of being a great leader of his clan. Beside his personal turmoil, one disaster was coming forward in the disguise of the white missionaries. They wanted to impose their power upon the land. They want to capture the land and settle in Umuofia. And But the native people could not save the land from the clutches of the white missionaries. One can claim the right to land where he actually belongs that is his fatherland. Uchendu, his uncle reminds him that a man belongs to his fatherland but when he is in bad times only motherland can rescue him:

We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. (Achebe 125)

Uchendu, his uncle made him realise the value of his motherland where he has born, but duty is foremost. One must take his own responsibility and go back to his land of work (fatherland):

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. (Achebe 126).

At the end of the novel, when Okonkwo came back to his fatherland with anxious expectation and great hopes for success and a beginning of a new life, he disappointed about the present horrible situation of the land. But after seven years of exile Okonkwo came back to his Umuofia and the whole scenario changed. They were in a serious conversation between Obierika and Okonkwo about the drastic changes that came about in Umuofia land and also in their life. They worried about the present situation of their land:

Does the white man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say that our customs are bad. How do you think we can fight when our own brothers have turned against us? The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allow him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act as like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us

together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 166)
 Okonkwo was very much determined that he will fight till the end. But realizing the weaknesses of his clan's unity and their lack of fighting spirit upset him extremely. Okonkwo made his decision to fightback 'the times have changed, and we must be fully, prepared' (183). But at the end he realised that, in his own community there is no unity in them to fight together against the colonial rule. Like the title of the novel suggest, in his life also everything falls apart, he could not help himself. His slaying of the messenger was an instinct act of self- preservation. He could not allow himself to be called cowardly so he did that act. It was the question of his clan's dignity. At the end, he did not want to surrender to them so he committed suicide to preserve his self respect though it was a sin to commit suicide against the law of the land. He could not fight the battle alone. He became heartbroken. But ultimately he kept his dignity. This novel truly depicts the African society, the people, their closeness towards natural environment, culture, and the colonizers impact on their life and value system. Custom and traditional values play a significant part in Igbo community people. The arrival of white people in their land destroys the traditional Ibo belief in their relationship with land/ god and nature or the "evil forest". In this novel, we can witness the horrors of colonialism, imperialism and its tremendous consequence on the colonized people's life. Okonkwo's seven years exile from the land he loved dearly made him disappointed. All his life he was striving for honour, wealth and to become a powerful leader of the clan but everything shattered because of his deprived from his land. Because of that Okonkwo had to leave his beloved fatherland following the command of his oracle's rule. It was the village tradition he had to follow.

This paper highlighted the Ibo community's close connection with their land, traditional values, culture

and nature which is very much ingrained into the people's life. During his seven years exile, Okonkwo came with his family to his motherland to seek refuge. But he has to go back to Umuofia, his fatherland as a man's right always belongs to his fatherland, during bad time one can always take refuge in motherland to get consolation, support, and peace, but ultimately he has to come back to his fatherland, the land of honour, prosperity and duty. At that point of time, the British missionary came and tries to settle on that land. And during that time Okonkwo's coming back to fatherland makes situation worst. The native people were very much disturbed and helpless in front of the white Missionaries oppressive force on them to rule on their land.

Here right to land belongs to the people of the land where one is born. But it was the historical time at the end of nineteenth century when British people came to settle in Nigeria. They slowly tried to capture the whole land. Things Fall Apart (1958) is a significant postcolonial text, and it revolves around various concerns like resistance, opposition, assertion of freedom, quest for liberty, struggle for identity and individuality. Here we encounter the imperialism of British (white people) rule in African country. In Igbo community the native peoples are fighting for their land where they belong. The outsiders' encroachment and claiming their authority over the land and the people become a historical issue. At that time, British colonial rule entered into Africa. In reality the land's rights are belonging to those Igbo peoples of Nigeria. But at the beginning they were hesitant to fight back. Later it becomes a historical revolution for freedom from slavery. In history, it is a long revolution to get back their land and also their freedom. Indeed, in Things Fall Apart the right to land issue has a significant element to play in the tragic hero Okonkwo's and the other native people's life.

References:

1. Achebe, Chinua. Things Fall Apart. London: Penguin Books, 1958. Print.
2. Aderibigbe, Femi. 'Listening to the Land: Native American Literary Responses to the Landscape Things Fall Apart' and the Case Against Imperialism. Web. 7 Apr, 2013.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinua_Achebe. wikipedia.org/wiki/Things_Fall_Apart
4. Mitchell, Margaret. Gone with the Wind. United States: Macmillan Publishers, 1936. print
5. Zolfagharkhani, Moslem, and Reyhaneh. An Eco-Critical Study of Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Scholarlink Research institute journals, 2013.

Swatilekha Mahato /swatilekha.mahato19@gmail.com
 Madame Curie Hostel.Room No.20/Department Of English/
 Pondicherry University/Kalapet/ Puducherry-605014