

***Things Fall Apart* Across Cultures: The Universal Significance of Chinua Achebe's 1958 Reconstruction of the African Heritage**

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe wrote his classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* in response to the stark negative portrayal of Africa and Africans by European Colonizers. This idea appears to have been conceived during his undergraduate days at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* appear to have negatively impacted and prompted Achebe to respond to the biased European colonial portrayal of Africa and Africans. That initial written response was *Things Fall Apart*!

The characters, societies and views expressed in the novel essentially are universal to humankind. There may be variations here and there in different social settings, but the novel portrays people in a communal environment grappling with survival on a daily basis on planet earth. The European colonizers painted a negative, one dimensional picture of Africa and Achebe felt challenged to set the records straight. In doing this, he revealed both the beautiful and ugly in the African ethos. This essay celebrates *Things Fall Apart* as a beacon of light at the end of the tunnel of colonialism. Achebe's text reaffirms African people's pride in their cultural heritage in the backdrop of attempts to dehumanize and portray them as savages by Europeans.

Introduction

Things Fall Apart may be examined from two broad perspectives. Initially it may be viewed as "things" actually starting to fall apart in the projected society because it shows aspects of an indigenous African culture fading and being replaced by an alien ethos. According to Aigboje Higo:

Things Fall Apart, then, is about a clan (community) which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared a common awareness and acted like one. The white man came and his coming broke this unity. In the process many heads rolled; new words, new usages and new applications gained entrance into men's (people's) heads and hearts and the old society gradually gave way. The process continues even today. (Achebe 1965: v). *Brackets are mine*.

Conversely, the novel points to another direction and possibility. It actually unravels and celebrates the meeting and hybridization of two divergent cultures, local and foreign - African and European. Indeed, African culture begins to blend with western culture, albeit in a lopsided manner in favour of the west. However, this "marriage" of cultures ultimately lays the foundation for independent movements, independence and the post-colonial era

in Africa. Africans adopted aspects of the alien western and indigenous African culture to attempt to reclaim the continent from foreign rule. It appears that things had to fall apart in order for them to rise up together and blend.

For countless centuries, the African continent and its inhabitants have been belittled, abused, disparaged, dehumanized, demoralized, exploited and plundered by Europeans, Arabian and Asian people. African cultures and traditions have deliberately been equated with negative phenomena such as ugliness, evil, hell and Lucifer. Moreover, words or phrases such as “aboriginal,” “black,” “bleak” “primitive,” “primeval,” “dark,” “jungle” and “wild” have been used to describe Africa and Africans. The African heritage therefore appears to be of no relevance in the global scheme of things. What is strange and very disturbing is the fact that the negative descriptions and perceptions emanate mainly from non-Africans, especially Europeans, Americans and some Asians.

The emergence in 1958 on the literary scene of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* marked the beginning of the end for the negative portrayal of Africa by Europeans and other races. For one thing, Achebe’s novel proved convincingly for all to discern that Africa and Africans lived, worked, loved, hated, and ultimately died like all human beings. In other words, Africans are human beings just like the rest of humanity on earth. The protagonist in Achebe’s novel, Okonkwo, is an ambitious and determined person from childhood. Unlike other young men in his community, he had a poor foundation for his life. He is however not cowed by the bleak prospects surrounding him. He actually works relentlessly and succeeds in surmounting his inherited difficulties:

Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men usually had. He did not inherit a barn from his father. There was no barn to inherit...

With a father like Unoka, Okonkwo did not have the start in life which many young men had. He neither inherited a barn nor a title, nor even a young wife. But in spite of these disadvantages, he had begun even in his father’s lifetime to lay the foundations of a prosperous future. It was slow and painful. But he threw himself into it like one possessed... (*Achebe 1965: 12-13*).

Achebe asserted that *Things Fall Apart* was “an act of atonement with my past, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal son” (*Christopher Barcock 2005: 1*). He sought to teach his African people, especially his readers, that their historical antecedents, deficient as these might appear, are not without their parallels elsewhere. In an essay, “The Novelist as Teacher,” Achebe sums up the motivation for his writings and the sets agenda for the African novelist by stating categorically that Africans were not savages (whom) Europeans, acting on God’s instructions, came to civilize:

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 long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them (*G.D Killam, ed.1973:4*).

In its affirmation of indigenous African culture and traditions, *Things Fall Apart* unwittingly raises poignant questions while challenging the prevailing dispensation of things. The crucial issues that the novel raises or hints at as a sort of subtle rebuff of colonialism include: Why does the European arrive as a visitor in Africa and other former colonies and suddenly assume the role of the high handed landlord? Why are human beings simply branded as “black” and “white”? Who initiated this trend? Why is the colour and terminology “black” predominantly synonymous with “evil,” “negative,” and “flawed” tendencies? Why do some folks believe that they are better and more superior human beings than others? Why is black smoke during the Vatican conclave of cardinals for the selection of a new pope synonymous with failure in the process and white smoke tantamount to success in choosing the new pope? Why can the Vatican not use green, yellow or red cards like the Federation of International Football Association (FIFA) to announce success, stalemate or failure in its papal selection process? Why are there still mainly European popes when Christianity is now spread all over the world? Where are the African, American, Australian and Asian popes? Why is the United States’ President’s official residence in Washington DC still referred to as “The White House,” when the USA is a diverse, multi coloured and multi racial society? Why can it not be simply called “Government House,” “the Presidency” or “State House” or “Number so and so Independence Avenue, Washington D.C.”? Why is skin pigmentation so relevant in human affairs instead of character content? Why are ethnic and racial yardsticks used to place wedges between fellow human beings? Why is gender employed to oppress and deny some people their due rights, needs and privileges? Why do human beings find it so difficult to be merely people - just people - God’s children daily reaching out for food, shelter and clothing as well as dreaming and sharing their dreams and striving to fulfil them? Why do people wear black clothes in some cultures when they are bereaved? Why can it not be any other colours? Are there really coal-black or snow-white people in the true sense of those words? Why is GOD almighty with His Angels portrayed as “white” and Lucifer and other fallen angels signified as “black” with horns? What is it that prompts some of the races to feel and act in a superior manner to other races? Can human beings not live simply together as members of a common family with GOD as their creator and parent? Does black really mean bleak and forlorn?

According to the South African writer and critic, Lewis Nkosi (1998), in *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe takes on the heavy responsibility of projecting the African continent through “the thrill of representing the drama of a vast, unwieldy and refractory drama of becoming,” to the rest of the world in a balanced, unapologetic perspective:

Chinua Achebe has not escaped this penance. Reading through millions of words of public statements, of reviews and interviews, of adulation and accusation, one is struck by the high price he has paid for being Africa’s greatest indigenous novelist (1).

Nkosi adds that Achebe is now:

Universally regarded as the progenitor of modern African Literature in English, the producer of at least three novels sure to remain part of the canon modern African Literature so long as it requires a canon, Achebe's stature is now greater even than that of his fellow Nigerian, the Noble Prize-winner Wole Soyinka (*Ibid*).

Chinua Achebe contends that writings about Africa by European colonial scholars that represented the continent in a very negative and incredible manner propelled him to write *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and other related texts. Such colonialist writings tended to depict the African continent and people mainly from a European perspective. Take for instance, the negative, primordial depiction of the River Congo – which is symbolic of the African landscape and the very positive reflection of the River Thames, London and other related British landmarks in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or the horrible portrayal of the African character, Mr. Johnson with his wife, Bamu, as being totally dependent on the British Colonial Officer in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*.

More relevantly, these writings were apparently conclusive, but not suggestive. The European colonial writers wrote as if they knew all about Africa and Africans and provided no room for verification or consultation with indigenous people regarding local phenomena and history. Consequently, they misrepresented and slandered the continent. They also altered or distorted names, customs, cultures, landscapes and traditions in order to sustain and provide free rein to their colonial agenda. In the process, local African names, institutions and sensibilities were deliberately denigrated and demonized. These local icons were then replaced with foreign European idiosyncrasies.

The two foregoing colonialist writers and texts readily bear testimony in this regard. Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* were apparently crucial in prompting Chinua Achebe to write *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and other related texts. In a recent interview conducted by Ezeh Ogoh, a correspondent for the "Guardian Newspapers," in Lagos –Nigeria, Achebe argued that:

'People around me were not like the people presented in the European so-called African romances,' ... "These were stories by a number of people, but the example that gave me a bad name was (Joseph) Conrad's." In a 1975 lecture, and then in an essay, Achebe took Conrad to task for emerging in his seminal short novel, *Heart of Darkness*, as a "thoroughgoing racist" even as he denounced imperialism. Achebe pointed out that Conrad had deprived his African characters of any voice, granting them only eight caricaturing words in the whole short novel. Pointing, still today, to those meagre eight words, he says: "That's all that Africa has, of language; the rest is screaming, shrieking, howling - animal sounds, you see." His criticism of Conrad drew vigorous protests from the author's defenders. But Achebe says his intention was

simple: to ask “why does one go to Africa for this kind of exoticism that demeans people, makes them less than their worth?” (Ezeh Ogoh 2008: 2)

The arrival on the literary scene in 1958 of Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* appeared to be a bolt of thunder from the pregnant clouds in the sky. Prior to the production of the novel, the curriculum of literature in African schools was apparently dominated by European and American literary texts such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson* and Mark Twain - Samuel Langhorne Clemens’ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Conrad’s text portrayed Africa as a dark continent that is essentially hostile and pristine in nature and is in addition, inhabited by savages and apes, while Cary’s book projected Africa as a dull, pampered, disorganized and spoilt child that needed direction and inspiration from the European colonial master or ‘father’. Conversely, Mark Twain’s fiction grappled with the difficulties faced by Europeans in their bid to tame and conquer the North American landscape. To the European colonizer, Africa was synonymous with the wild landscape that early European settlers in North America had to contend with. So, it is not surprising to have Twain’s texts among the colonial literary canon in much of Anglophone Africa.

Chinua Achebe had the singular privilege of attending schools in colonial Africa (Nigeria, in this case) where only the European approved literary canon was dispensed to pupils and students. However, being a highly perceptive and critical person, Achebe was able to see through the European filtered approach in the conduct of education. He adjudged it to be a distorted picture of the reality that prevailed in pre-colonial Africa. Thus, he resolved to reconstruct the image of Africa through literature and be as truthful as possible. The result of that resolution is *Things Fall Apart*. Still sensing the need to do a follow up or back up his bid to portray Africa realistically, objectively and relevantly, Achebe wrote *Arrow of God* which, acts as a sequel to issues projected in his first novel and reveals in greater details the nitty gritty of the rich African cultural heritage by showing how European colonialism actually worked to destroy African customs and traditions in order to rule and exploit the Continent. In doing so, the representatives of the European colonizers - the administrators, the traders and even the Christian Missionaries, connived actively to stifle local opposition and to distort the reality that prevailed.

Through *Things Fall Apart* with its sequel, *Arrow of God* therefore, Achebe significantly began to alter the dominant negative image of Africa and Africans by European colonizers to a more positive and practical representation of the continent and its people. For instance, where colonialist writers like Conrad and Cary, who were not grounded in African cultures, traditions and nuances, tended to project strange, superficial images of Africa and Africans from a figment of their eurocentric sensibilities, Achebe, who was born and bred in Africa by Africans, responded to such portrayals by affording readers a balanced picture of the state of affairs in the continent. The European colonialist representations of Africa were essentially negative and aimed at giving an ugly picture of the continent and its people. On the contrary, Achebe and other afrocentric writers presented both the good and the bad about Africa and Africans. Achebe and his category of writers pointed out clearly and in strong terms that every race and continent has its ugly and fine attributes. They warned that

Africa and Africans should not be singled out for negative portrayals by Europeans who, in any case, have their own negative and positive attributes and histories to contend with.

Universally, Africans and all indigenous peoples and cultures that experienced varying forms and levels of colonialism and exploitation are reassured and bailed out by the emergence of *Things Fall Apart* and other related texts in the postcolonial canon that seek to reflect such societies and people as they truly were at the time of the dispensation mirrored by this group of creative writers. It is also apparent that the European colonizers tended to dismiss, demonize or downgrade local phenomena in the colonized lands, especially ones which they did not comprehend or were non-existent in their own cultures or seemed strange to them. For instance, indigenous African religious practices were thoroughly vilified, condemned and curtailed. The colonizers saw nothing good or positive about these practices and promptly referred to them as fetish, demonic or even voodoo. Indigenous people partaking in these ceremonies were branded as pagans.

In a previous essay (*Mogu in Arua, et al, ed.2006 - Chapter 16*), I argued that:

Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian writer who through works like *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, retrieved, redefined and repositioned an Africanist view of Africans as opposed to the European colonialist approach exemplified by Joseph Conrad, Joyce Cary and similar Eurocentric writers.

Since European colonialist writers tended to demonize and negate Africa or gloss over her positive features, Achebe felt challenged to answer back through writing in order to mirror issues in their correct perspectives. Hence, the appearance on the scene of *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *Morning Yet*, *On Creation Day* among others. I further stated in my essay that, in *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe:

Imaginatively recreates an Igbo community in what is today, Nigeria, at the threshold and at the early phases of both European colonialism and the advent of the Twentieth Century. Contrary to the lazy, weak, naïve, disorganized and incoherent people and communities depicted in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Cary's *Mister Johnson*, Achebe in his two books recalls the African past as it truly was in both positive and negative attributes. In *Things Fall Apart* and in *Arrow of God*, the Umuofia and Umuaro communities with their leaders and spokespersons such as Okonkwo and Ezeulu are shown in their daily communal endeavours. People are cultured, well organised and led through a hierarchy of elders. They work hard in their farms and other agricultural activities. There are age grades which enhance the organization and orderliness of the communities. There are cultural events like wrestling, dances, festivals and religious worship. Disputes are internally resolved. The spiritual realm looms and presides over entire communities not unlike in the modern day Christian and Islamic settings. Indeed, it is the arrival of the presumptuous foreigner - the European colonizer that ushers in chaos and disruption to the status quo... (ibid)

Things Fall Apart essentially replicates the traditional African society as well as the fundamental changes that the indigenous society experienced largely due to the intervention by the European colonizer. The novel focuses on the community and society at large more than on individual characters. This is due to the African world view which emphasises the community than the individual. The African cosmos views the individual as an integral part of the larger community. Therefore, characters in *Things Fall Apart* are seen in relation to the other members of the community rather than as self-sustaining individuals commonly found in western literary texts. Even though individual achievements are highly esteemed, these are seen as integrally linked to the larger social structure. This world view contrasts sharply with that of Europe which essentially emphasises the individual as opposed to the community. Owing to these differences in emphases and perceptions, African writers have repeatedly been accused by European critics of being unable to produce great literary works that are focused on individuals as is done in the West. These are the kind of writers that Chinua Achebe frowns at and reproves. To this category of critics, he states clearly that theories and books alone are not sufficient knowledge for insight about Africa (*G.D.Killam, ed.1973:4-7*).

A major accomplishment of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is that it has been able to reach across to a wide spectrum of cultures globally to express the rich and unique culture possessed by Africa and Africans prior to the arrival of the European. This fact allows for objective comparisons among readers from various backgrounds to discover what is universal or particular among Africans and the rest of the human family globally. The realization that *Things Fall Apart* is now published in virtually all the major languages in the world, coupled with the understanding that it has effectively put to rest the arguments by European colonialist writers that Africa was a jungle and that Africans were primitive people with no identifiable heritage of human civilization, lends credence to its universal importance. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe juxtaposes the European colonialist impression of Africans as crude and 'primeval' people who stood no chance of advancing in the worldwide scheme of things with the arguments that Africans were actually culturally stable and that the alien colonialists connived to destroy or distort such legacies because they were too naïve to discern this vital aspect of the indigenous heritage:

The "enemy," the Europeans could easily see from the mere intelligence of the author that Nigeria (Africa, by extension) had potential. The story is set in Umuofia, which in Nigeria (Igbo) is translated into "Bush Children," bush meaning "uneducated and uncivilised"... Achebe chose Umuofia to represent the opinion Europeans held that the natives (indigenes) of Nigeria are a "tribe" (an ethnic group) of "uncivilized savages." Achebe proves that this theory is purely ignorant with his use of Igbo proverbs (http://www.york.ac.uk/students/su/essaybank/politicts/achebe_novels_nigeria.htm). *Brackets are mine.

Conclusion

Accomplishments in the fields of science and technology have increasingly turned the world into a global community. The variegated nature of cultures and traditions in the world, rather than detracting from, should contribute to the magnificence of the human race and add to its splendour. If the world had merely a single race, language, religion or culture, people would by now be jaded. The varieties in the global family actually enhance humans as a species. Each ethnic representation brings with it a unique attribute that excites and sometimes puzzles members from other backgrounds. However, the joy is in discovering similarities and differences among us in order to try to qualify and quantify the rich endowments that, added together, are capable of propelling the human race further to astounding heights in the realm of achievements. Through *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe has added the African voice to the emerging ethos of human affairs. That voice was stifled and veiled for quite a while, to the point that it seemed to be non-existent, as the European colonizer tried to hoodwink the rest of humanity.

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