

TRAGIC DIMENSION IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses how the encounter between the missionaries and the Igbo society in Africa results in a tragic loss of native culture with reference to Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. The incursion of the white man and his culture resulted in many social and psychological upheavals in the African society. Colonization in a way becomes responsible for the destruction of the Igbo society. The novel Things Fall Apart presents the conflict between the individual and the society and its consequences in a colonial society. The paper analyzes how a tragic dimension is furthered in the novel by the protagonist because of his tragic flaw. It sheds light on the reasons of the tragedy that unfolds on the Igbo society.

Key Words: Colonization, Cultural Conflict, Tragic flaw, Tragedy, Cultural history.

Commonwealth literature has gained importance because of its search for universality and truth. It is a rich source of different cultures and perspectives. It has added a new dimension to the English Literature. It is a new voice which signifies the universal human condition. Commonwealth literature presents human predicament that is aggregated by the social historical and economic change. The major themes of commonwealth writers has been exile, retrieval of past history and culture, the quest for identity, the effects of colonization and racism.

African literature occupies a special place in Commonwealth literature, for its vitality and authenticity of experience. It has succeeded in presenting the conflicts and contradictions of the newly emerged African society. It presents the clash between two major influences it has seen- the traditional influence and the colonial experience. The writings of these African authors reflect the social and political movements and have given importance to the aspirations of its people.

Chinua Achebe is one of today's foremost African novelists. Achebe has become renowned throughout the world as a father of modern African literature. His novels are concerned with

the legacy of colonialism at both the individual and societal level. He portrays in English the tribal African culture, to which he belongs and shows how culture was not something the West gave to the black people. Achebe says that he wants to show,

“ the African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, and they knew poetry above all, they had dignity”(1577)¹

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* got published in the year 1958 and is recognized as the mile stone in the Commonwealth literature. The novel deals with the tragic human consequences of the collusion of the African and European cultures in Nigeria. It is set in a traditional Igbo society, at the time, when the first European missionaries and administrative officials were beginning to penetrate inland. Oknokwo, the strongest man in the community, tries to oppose the white man but some of them were won over by the white man's faith and the clan is no longer united as before. When his people refuse to follow Oknokwo, the protagonist commits suicide in anger, frustration and despair. The novel *Things Fall Apart* is set in the 1890s and portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. The white missionaries saw Igbo as uncivilized individuals in desperate need of their help. Although the motive of the arrival of missionaries in Umuofia was to rule over its people, the missionaries should have also seen this as a way of a cultural exchange between the two. Because both Igbo and the missionaries has until now not known the culture of each other. The white man believed his culture to be morally superior to Igbo culture and this caused a conflict between the two cultures.

The novel can be roughly divided into three parts. The first part describes the life of the Igbo people before the arrival of white people. It gives a detailed description of the way of life of the Igbo people in a culture of tradition but also of questioning those traditions. The second part deals with Okonkwo's seven years of exile and the arrival of the colonial culture of missionaries, bureaucracy and white officialdom; the effects of that arrival, including the conversion of Okonkwo's son Nwoye and his subsequent alienation from his father. The third part deals with how the white people's law, education, power and economics smother and destroy the whole Igbo culture as described in the first section; Okonkwo's return to Umuofia after his exile and his tragic end. The novel deals with the tragic demise of the Igbo culture. It shows the gradual disintegration of the native culture when it is confronted by missionaries.

Things Fall Apart presents a well ordered society in which close ties are maintained with the ancestors and spirits. The focus of the novel is more on the conflict between native and alien culture. Achebe explores the good and evil prevailing in the native culture as well as in the alien culture. As David Cook points out

"he prefers to reveal the darker side of both the traditions as well as the better side and leaves us to draw our own conclusions".(142)²

In the story of Okonkwo, the novelist has brought together the cultural history of a society at a critical point of transition. We see the futile attempt of Okonkwo to fight against an inexorable tide of change which finally overcomes him. Through the community of Igbo and Okonkwo's struggle, Achebe has illustrated that how historical changes affect the society and culture.

"Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights".(3)³

Okonkwo rises from humble origins to become a powerful leader in Umuofia, a rural village in southeastern Nigeria. As Okonkwo climbs the ladder to success, however, it becomes apparent that his strengths are also his weaknesses: his self-confidence becomes pride, his manliness develops into authoritarianism, and his physical strength eventually turns into uncontrolled rage. In a broader sense, Achebe sets this story about Okonkwo at the end of the nineteenth century when Europeans first began colonizing this region of Nigeria on a large scale. By so doing, Achebe establishes a parallel between Okonkwo's personal tragedy and colonialism's tragic destruction of native African cultures.

Ikemefuna is brought as a hostage and sacrificed to Umuofia by their neighbours Mbaino to avoid war and bloodshed. As a guardian Okonkwo looked after the boy for three years and the boy Ikemefuna is friendly with the Okonkwo's son Nwoye. Though Okonkwo is proud of the boy, he never admits it openly. This is a tragic flaw of the character as he believed that it is cowardly to openly admit the affection. When the time comes to kill the boy Ikemefuna, as a leader of the clan, Okonkwo takes part in the killing. This is the point of undoing for him. In order not to appear weak he, assists the people in execution of the oracle. The killing initiates a series of conflicts. It is the beginning of the downfall of the protagonist.

The killing of Ikemefuna represents a pivotal episode in the novel not only as a reflection of Okonkwo's disturbed mental state, but in its reverberation through the novel, as a result of its effect upon his son, Nwoye. It marks the beginning of the boy's disaffection toward his father and ultimately his alienation from the community that Okonkwo has come to represent for himself. The fate of Ikemefuna, its stark revelation of the grim underside of the tribal ethos, engenders the emptiness in his heart that influences Nwoye to Christian conversion.

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague persistent question that haunted his young soul – the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled [104].

The time Okonkwo returns after his exile, he understands clearly that he does not have a place in the clan. The missionaries have taken hold of the clan. His own people are not with him. He finds that the new religion has grown in strength.

He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion, which, he was told, had gained ground. He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the land. But some of these losses were not irreparable. He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. (155)

Things Fall Apart is a tragic drama of the whole society. As Irele Aboila feels

“Things Fall Apart is the tragedy of one man worked out his personal conflicts-his neurosis almost-as well as out of the contrariness of this destiny. Yet the title is not without relevance, for the novel does have another dimension. Okonkwo’s suicide is a gesture that symbolizes at the same time his personal refusal of a new order as well as the collapse of the old order which he represents. For Okonkwo’s inflexibility, his tragic flaw, is a reflection of his society; his defeat, though a deformation derives from a corresponding trait in his society, an aspect of it pushed to its extreme logical frontiers”.(14) ⁴

A tragic flaw is an attribute of a character that ultimately leads to the demise of that character. This kind of literary device is commonly found in tragedies. Tragic flaws have been an important part of character development ever since the time of Greek mythology and drama. The protagonist is the victim of the flaw of the character because he is the victim of both circumstance and their own essential nature.

At a personal level, Okonkwo's son Nwoye does not listen to his father which is a shock to him, whereas, at the larger level, the focus of the novel is on the sense of loss and tragic disintegration of the pattern of native life. Okonkwo despises his father for his laziness and weakness and lack of possessions and title. He thinks that these represent failure, so he strives

to be the opposite in all ways. He is presented as one of the 'great men' of Umuofia, yet he is disgraced by his exile and final act of suicide. Okonkwo loves his son Nwoye but treats him very harshly when Nwoye disappoints him. He thinks highly of Ikemefuna but will not express his feelings or admit them to himself. Achebe insists that the past is part and parcel of our present and already a pre-determinant of the future. Okonkwo is fit for tragedy, because he looked life in the face and did what he thought is right. But he is destroyed in the process because his nature and a tragic flaw of his character.

In spite of Okonkwo's apparent conformity to norms, and sincerity of purpose we find he faces tragic dimension in the novel because of his peculiar and eccentric interpretation of social rules. Okonkwo's blinding passion leads him to a final act of egoism that finally marks him with a tragic solitude, rendered tersely in the line in which we finally glimpse him: "He wiped his machete on the sand and went away" [145].

The tragedy is symbolized by the destruction of Okonkwo, who is the very embodiment of the tribal values and also its strength and weakness. Okonkwo's courage and perseverance in breaking away from his father's example and creating heroic destiny for himself by following the ideals of the tribal society are admirable. But his inflexibility becomes his tragic flaw, the main cause of his downfall. The dislocation of the African psyche following the disintegration of the older social pattern, as we see it both in Okonkwo and the society is so profound that a meaningful social and moral reorientation is not within sight. Hence the starkness of the human tragedy stands out in all its pathos and brilliance in the novel. Though the tragedy of Okonkwo is at once individual, it is at other point the tragedy of the society. Though Okonkwo is almost cast in the mould of Homeric hero, excelling in courage and heroism, he fails to understand his tragic flaw. His action does not allow him to do the retrospection. Even after his understanding that his rigid ways, he still adheres to those values till his death.

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