

Searching for New identity in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: Does Future Peace Exist in Change and Hybridity?

Dr. Ghada Fayez Refaat Abu-Enein

Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts/ UNRWA University

Abstract— This research focuses on the novel *Things Fall Apart* by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe. The goal of this research is to show the effects of the white powers on the Nigerian society by articulating how their life was as ordinary Nigerians and how it became after the colonizers arrived introducing and addresses the problems, consequences, and effects of the colonial powers over the colonized countries in all aspects whether politically, economically, culturally. The novel was published in 1958 drawing the downfall of the main character **Okonkwo** while dealing with the arrival of the British colonial powers at that time in the south-eastern parts of Nigeria during the late nineteenth century. Okonkwo resembles the downfall of the Nigerian society, how he went from being the strongest among his village into having a tragic ending. Towards the end of the nineteenth century British colonialism was wide spread through all Africa and other parts of the world. Nigeria was amongst other African nations that received visitors who were on a colonizing mission politically and religiously introducing their religion and culture that is later imposed to on Igbo who are threatened by this sudden change in all aspects of their lives. Trying to form a new identity to accommodate the changes inflicted on the culture of the Igbo was a conflict that Okonkwo could not stand.

Keywords— postcolonial, Okonkwo, Nigeria, Igbo society, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

The novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was written by the late Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (16 November 1930 – 21 March 2013) who was a novelist, poet, professor, and critic. His first novel *Things Fall Apart* is considered to be one of his best writings and most widely read book in modern African literature, he won the Man Booker International Prize in 2007. In 1970, the novel was made into a film starring Princess Elizabeth of Toro by Hollywood lawyer Edward Mosk and his wife Fern, who wrote the screenplay, and in 1987, the book was made into a very successful miniseries directed by David Orere and broadcast on Nigerian television by the Nigerian Television Authority. It starred several established film actors, including Pete Edochie, Nkem Owoh and Sam Loco Efe. In 2008, a film adaptation of *Things Fall Apart* was made by a Nigerian production company with an all-Nigerian cast. Pete Edochie starred as Okonkwo.

Chinua Achebe wrote this novel as a response to the misrepresentations that the colonists gave about Africa and the Igbo society, describing how his rich culture was

destroyed on the hands of Europeans. Chinua grew up in a colonial society trying to defend his country in any way and he chose defending back through his writings and his knowledge. He was raised in the Igbo town of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria; he was a perfect student at school and won a scholarship to study medicine but then he changed his mind and decided to study English literature at University College (now the University of Ibadan). Achebe became captivated with world religions and traditional African cultures, he began writing stories as a university student and after graduation, he worked for the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) and soon moved to the metropolis of Lagos. He became famous worldwide for his novel *Things Fall Apart* in the late 1950s; his later novels include *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People* (1966), and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). Achebe wrote his novels in English and defended the use of English the "language of colonizers" in African literature.

Achebe's parents, Isaiah Okafo Achebe and Janet Anaenechi Iloegbunam, were converts to the Protestant Church Mission Society (CMS) in Nigeria, his father stopped

practicing the religion of his ancestors, but he respected its traditions. Achebe's name is an abbreviation for Chinualumogu "May God fight on my behalf" which was a prayer for divine protection and stability indicating that the Igbo society believed in a lot of superstitions as a part of their traditions and religion. The Achebe family had five other surviving children who had names of traditional words relating to their new religion after converting: Frank Okwuofu, John Chukwuemeka Ifeanyichukwu, Zinobia Uzoma, Augustine Ndubisi, and Grace Nwanneka. Achebe's parents faced a crossroads of conflict between traditional culture and Christian missionaries which caused a tremendous influence on the children especially Chinua.

Things Fall Apart tells the story of a yam farmer named Okonkwo who lives during the colonization of Nigeria and struggles with bad memories about his father – a lazy debtor fond of playing the flute – as well as the contradictions that emerge when the white colonists arrive in his village of Umuofia, this leads Okonkwo to suffer cultural conflict because of the crossroads between African tradition (Igbo society) and modernity embodied by European powers like the Christian ideology.

Chinua Achebe tackles several issues and themes within *Things Fall Apart* like colonialism, post colonialism, feminism and psychoanalysis but the most dominant themes that hover over the novel are colonialism and post colonialism. On one hand colonialism is a period up to late 19th century (1874-1914) that influenced literature and writers to write about the struggles that faced both sides of colonized and colonists during that period, dealing with the policy of a foreign power looking for extending, ruling and taking over other people and territories with the aim of opening trade opportunities. Colonialism refers either to the system of the tyrannical government or ideology (imperialism).

On the other hand, post colonialism was molded over colonialism as a reaction against it, and it is portrayed either from the point of view of the colonized or the colonizers describing what happened during colonialism and the consequences after it. Post colonialism is found in many literary works especially those coming from Africa, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent talking about how the colonized struggled with their identities in the face of colonization. As for Africa, by the 1900, most of it had been colonized by seven European powers: Britain, Italy, Spain, Germany, France, Portugal and Belgium. People of Africa were facing European Imperialist aggression, Diplomatic pressure and military invasions but at the same times they

showed various forms of resistance against the attempt to colonize their country and impose themselves which leads to a huge conflict between identity (culture) and change (white influence).

Post colonialism as a term used in literature was first coined by Dr. Edward Wadie Said, an American Palestinian who was born in Palestine in 1 November 1935 and died in 25 September 2003; he was a literature professor at Columbia University, a public intellectual, and the founder of postcolonial studies. Said is known for the book *Orientalism* (1978) that discusses the Us-and-Them binary social relation and how the Western world views the Middle-East:

I doubt if it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India, or Egypt, in the later nineteenth century, took an interest in those countries, which was never far from their status, in his mind, as British colonies. To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact—and yet *that is what I am saying* in this study of *Orientalism*. (*Orientalism* p.11).

Colonial powers expanded largely over the world colonizing territories, according to Dr. Edward Said's *Orientalism*: "from 1815 to 1914 European direct colonial dominion expanded from about 35 percent of the Earth's surface to about 85 percent of it." (P.41) indicating the rapid spread of colonies like The United Kingdom that was once called The Empire of Great Britain - the empire which the sun never sets off - showing the tremendous number of colonies that spread worldwide.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the town of Umuofia is like completely shocked with the arrival of the British colonial powers and how they started to change everything radically starting with religion and beliefs and down to changing a whole culture, according to the Nigerian English professor Ernest N. Emenyonu describes the colonial experience in the novel as "the systematic emasculation of the entire culture". This novel deals with the main character **Okonkwo** an Igbo man who is a local wrestling champion in his town Umuofia, he strives to make his way in a world seems to value only manliness so he achieves great social and financial success by embracing his ideals and his community's traditions: "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 honor to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat“(*Things Fall Apart*, Chapter 1. P.3). Okonkwo is characterized by hard-working, strength, self-confidence and toughness which is the complete opposite of his father’s character -Unoka-who was lazy, coward and never achieved anything in his life. He was mired in debt which made Okonkwo always ashamed of his father:

Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness It was the fear of himself, lest he should be found to resemble his father. Even as a little boy he had resented his father’s failure and weakness Okonkwo was ruled by one passion to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness. (*Things Fall Apart*13).

From the previous quote it’s clear that Okonkwo hates everything that reminds him of his father, even his own son Nwoye:

Okonkwo’s first son, Nwoye, was then twelve years old but was already causing his father great anxiety for his incipient laziness. At any rate, that was how it looked to his father, and he sought to correct him by constant nagging and beating. And so Nwoye was developing into a sad-faced youth. (*Things Fall Apart*13).

As the novel progresses the protagonist Okonkwo accidentally shoots a man and kills him leading to the banishment of Okonkwo and his family outside the village of Umuofia as a punishment. While he is away from his home the white colonial powers start to arrive to the village and from here everything begins to change radically:

Umuofia had indeed changed during the seven years Okonkwo had been in exile. The church had come and led many astray. Not only the low-born and the outcast but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles and who like a madman had cut the anklet of his titles and cast it away to join the

Christians But apart from the church, the white men had also brought a government. They had built a court where the district commissioner judged cases in ignorance. He had court messengers who brought men to him for trial. (*Things Fall Apart*174).

How easy the villagers accepted the arrival of the white powers to settle on their homeland, the Ibo people didn't know how to deal with the colonial powers and the sudden cultural change of their whole society, beliefs and religion. It also shows the quick expansion of the white colonies on the African lands building churches, courts and establishing governments to rule the people of the African villages. Therefore, when Okonkwo returns he is shocked with what led to all that change in his homeland while he was away and as a result to this change, Okonkwo tries to take the missionaries out of his village, but his efforts are in vain, he kills one of the messengers but instead of standing by his side, the villagers refuse his actions and they let the other messengers escape:

“Perhaps I had been away too long,” Okonkwo said, almost to himself, “But I cannot understand these things you tell me. What is it that happened to our people? Why they have lost their power to fight? ... why did they not fight back? Had they no guns and machetes? We must fight these men and drive them from the land.” (*Things Fall Apart* 175-176).

Clearly, Okonkwo was the only one who refused to surrender to the changes that the white forced on them and he was trying hard to convince his brothers from the village to fight back but unfortunately most of his brothers have turned into Christianity and gave up their land to the white powers.

Achebe describes how the Europeans changed the African culture by changing their beliefs in superstitions and traditions, for example they changed the African people’s thoughts about the power of their ancestral Gods, the sacrifice of young boys and how they treat women. The colonized Africans were forced to follow the culture and religion of the colonizers whether they wanted to follow them or not, it was a matter of subjection from Europeans towards the Africans, justifying this act under the excuse of bringing evolution to the primitive tribes of the lower Niger indicating the white man’s burden in holding responsibility of educating Africans, while in fact the main reason that led

the Europeans to settle in Africa was their hunger for natural resources that Africa owned then soon most African states were dominated by European powers.

In "*Things Fall Apart*" the African Igbo culture was a strong and practical in its religious beliefs, customs, government, economic, and social relations until the Britain colonial powers came and changed everything radically wiping a whole community and destroying everything relates to it starting with religion where they introduced Christianity and reaching to their system as a whole. The missionaries at first attacked the outcasts "Osu" of the Igbo who are the weak ones to wash their brain and introduce Christianity to them to be a starting point for them to launch from and expand step by step, therefore the missionaries explained to the outcasts how their religion is weak and wrong in order to convince them to convert to Christianity. The Africans were told that they must shave their hair in order to let go of their heathen and wrong beliefs, the Christians even lived in the Evil Forest to prove that the Africans belief system and superstitions were not true, but completely false, so the Europeans challenged the Igbo religion in order to succeed in conquering the Africans and they managed to do just that, they condemned the matter of multiple Gods that the Igbo society believed in, the Europeans built their church upon the cursed ground of the Evil Forest to prove to Africans that Christianity is the new faith and religion that they all should follow:

"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 allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (*Things Fall Apart* 167).

Okonkwo is having a battle within himself as a reaction to what happened to his country, he does not only blame the white for what happened, he also blames his brothers who

converted to Christianity easily letting down everyone else instead of fighting back defending their beliefs and customs.

During all this change that Okonkwo suffered from which was no an easy thing to experience that led to the downfall of the main character. Okonkwo is a tragic hero in the classical sense and instead of using his powers that he had as the strongest character to help his country, he walked into his own end just because he couldn't keep up with the change of his identity so when the missionaries discovered that Okonkwo killed one of their messengers as a sign of revolting they sent after him bringing him to justice but unfortunately they found Okonkwo dead hanging himself on a tree behind his compound. Okonkwo had a shameful death just like his father's, although he was one of the greatest men lived on earth in Umuofia:

Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. "Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him", said Obierika "Why can't you take him down yourselves?" asked the commissioner. "It's against our custom" said one of the men. "It's an abomination for a man to take his own life. It's an offense against the Earth ... his body is evil, and only strangers may touch it." ... Obierika turned to the commissioner and said ferociously: "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* 207-208).

Okonkwo went to his end in a pathetic way. He would be buried like a dog after he brought shame to his clan for what he did. Okonkwo's tragic flaw was his inability to accept the drastic radical change that came upon his village, he felt that the whites were not manly enough to lead his country and he will not be a man if he falls to their control, he was afraid to lose his social status if he did not resist. Okonkwo believed that the worst thing that could happen to a man is to be a woman while you are a man, his violent temper which got him in trouble with his religion, clan, family and the missionaries finally led to everything falling apart for him taking away his life in a sorrowful way that relates in no way to a death of an honorable man.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps one of the main reasons that Chinua Achebe drew for the fall of his society was his people's inability to accept cultural change and to learn English, thinking that only the Igbo language is the language that should be used to preserve the Igbo culture, they never thought of using English in their daily life. Another reason is the way the whites treated the Africans as slaves living a primitive life, showing no respect to them. The missionaries used a hostile approach in taking over the lands of the Africans Obliterating their language, customs, beliefs and religion. The cultural exchange between the two could have benefited the Igbo more but they showed no interest in European culture resisting any kind of change. This was represented in the character of Okonkwo, yet there were others who thought there is no hope in fighting the colonizer.

In the end, after thinking about everything that happened to the Igbo society, it might be the wrong way the white missionaries introduced themselves into the African society which led to the downfall of the whole society. The superior approach that the West used towards the Igbo culture, religion angered and offended the Igbo society. Colonialism tried to wipe out the Igbo society and scared its identity forever.

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