

The Marginal Justice and Oppressor- Oppressed Relationship in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Achebe shows in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the intricate picture of how the colonial empire and those colonized relate to each other by using the main character of Okonkwo and missionaries. The novel sincerely depicts the results of the unjust regime and the failure of colonial justice system as well as how it affects the Igbo people. The novel shows how the colonizers' world and killing Machiavellian rules forces the people in the village of Igbo to be assimilated with. Okonkwo's hunger for power and a need to incur control lets him failed in the end. This viewing of Annabel and Susanna, as well as his becoming frustrated with their behavior, is an effect of his strong abidance to high and rigid gender roles and his dislike of anything that might threaten his position in the hierarchy that is favorable to him. This process leads to his initial exile and finally his death.

Keywords: oppressor, marginal, colonizer, missionaries, and justice.

المستخلص

يُظهر أتشيبي في رواية *أشياء تنهار* (1958) الصورة المعقدة لكيفية تعامل الإمبراطورية الاستعمارية و تعامل المُستعمرين مع بعضهم البعض من خلال استخدام الشخصية الرئيسية أوكونكو والمبشرين. تصور الرواية بصدق نتائج النظام الجائر وفشل نظام العدالة الاستعماري وكيف يؤثر ذلك على شعب إيغبو. تُظهر الرواية كيف تُجبر قواعد العالم الاستعماري القاتل والماكيافيلي الناس في قرية إيغبو على الاندماج. يؤدي جوع أوكونكو للسلطة والحاجة إلى فرض سيطرته إلى فشله في النهاية. إن نظرته إلى أنابيل وسوزانا وشعوره بالاحباط من سلوكهما هو نتيجة لالتزامه القوي بالأدوار الجنسية العالية والصارمة وكرهه لأي شيء قد يهدد موقعه في التسلسل الهرمي الذي يفضلُه. و تؤدي هذا العملية إلى نفيه أولا وأخيراً إلى موته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المُضطهد، الهامشي، المستعمر، المبشرون، والعدالة

Introduction

Things Fall Apart takes us on a journey back to the late 19th century in the vibrant Igbo village of Umuofia, where we get to know Okonkwo, a strong warrior and influential leader. This classic novel, penned by the talented Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in 1958, has become a timeless gem in African literature, celebrated for its exploration of culture, tradition, and the impact of colonialism. Divided into three parts, the story begins by delving into Okonkwo's personal

history, family life, and the intricate customs of the Igbo clan. Achebe skillfully paints a vivid picture of the rich Igbo culture, social structure, and religious practices before the intrusion of European colonizers and missionaries. (Achebe, 1958, p. 22; Oyebade, 2003, p.55)

As we progress through the narrative, the novel unfolds the gradual encroachment of British colonialism and Christian missionaries into the heart of Umuofia. The clash between tradition and modernity becomes apparent, causing conflicts between the villagers and the newcomers. Okonkwo, deeply rooted in tradition, grapples with the changing societal landscape, watching his own status and power erode. (Irele, 2000, p. 92)

Through Okonkwo's character and the events in Umuofia, Achebe weaves a tapestry of themes touching on cultural identity, colonialism, religion, masculinity, and the inevitable clash between tradition and the evolving modern world. "Things Fall Apart" stands as a poignant commentary on the profound impact of European colonization on African societies, unraveling the intricate cultural and social tensions that emerged. This novel is more than just a literary masterpiece; it's a compelling story praised for its captivating narrative, well-developed characters, and its ability to humanize the Igbo people and their culture. Achebe challenges stereotypes often found in Western literature, offering a unique perspective on African societies. "Things Fall Apart" remains a cornerstone in African literature, captivating readers worldwide with its timeless relevance and profound insights.

Analysis:

Things Fall Apart introduces in its first lines the main character, Okonkwo. The introduction is simple but intense;

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. 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. The drums beat and the flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Okonkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. (Achebe, 1958, p.1)

Okonkwo distinguished himself and brought dignity to his village by defeating Amalinze the Cat, a guy who had not been defeated in seven years, in a wrestling match. Since then, Okonkwo's wrestling reputation has risen throughout Umuofia's nine communities. He is notoriously short-tempered, especially when dealing with failing guys like his father, who passed away ten years ago in a mountain of debt. (Bloom, 2010: pp. 1,8, 16)

Things Fall Apart describes in a distant region of Nigeria the end of one age of civilization and the coming of colonialism and Christianity. But, Achebe's skill is so subtle, his construction with the characters and expertise so priceless, and his estimation of details and nuance so delicious that as the reader flips the pages, he/she forgets that you're immersed in the atmosphere of a pivotal time in history. The narrative concentrates on the character of Okonkwo, who is powerful, uncompromising, and devoted to his inherited traditions. The novel narrates the tale of the wives and children of Okonkwo, life of village, and local customs, as the story of the child who is kidnapped from another village as vengeance; he settles with the family of Okonkwo, and Okonkwo eventually turns to cherish him, but the readers are aware that he must be sacrificed in the end. The moment he is murdered is almost unbearably gloomy and horrifying to read. Evidently, Okonkwo's strength is analogous to a weakness. Achebe presents what the reader knows will be a tragedy with a blend of cynicism, sorrow, and a certain amount of anger. The first time the novel submitted to the publisher, Heinemann, it was rejected, the reader referred to it as "the best debut novel since the war." After forty years, it remains the best debut novel written since World War II. (Callil and Tóibín: 1950, p.20)

The struggle between Okonkwo and the colonial forces is a central theme in *Things Fall Apart*. He portrays the communal trauma, cultural transformation, and individual alienation that British colonial and missionary efforts inflicted upon the developed and complex Igbo civilization. In the end, Okonkwo's efforts to protect his people from the oppressive colonial practices fail, and the colonial troops emerge victorious, Okonkwo said, "Let us not reason like cowards," said Okonkwo. 'If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does." (Achebe, p.52). This highlights the power imbalance between the Igbo and the colonizers and the devastating effects of colonial rule on the Igbo people. The narrator explains that "[Okonkwo] was a man of action, a man of war. Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood". (Achebe, p.3). Through the injustices encountered by specific individuals in Igbo society, particularly the treatment of outcasts, the marginalization of women, and the persecution of non-Christian Igbo people by

Christian missionaries, marginal justice is shown. Through Okonkwo, Achebe underscores the importance of identifying and fixing these inequities to establish more just and equal society. (Lynn, 2017: p.3)

The narrative evokes a classic epic by addressing a community with similar assumptions, values, traditions, history, and tales. In Achebe's books, the perpetrators of these atrocities are European colonialists and their successors, but the author also holds numerous African actors accountable. In addition, he calls attention to the interdependence between the political abuses committed by colonialists and those committed by Nigerians. The outcasts are forced to reside on the outside of the hamlet, away from the rest of the population, because they are believed to be cursed. They are deprived of access to basic essentials such as water and must rely on the charity of others to survive. This inequity is accentuated by Okonkwo's persona; (Innes, 1978: p. 170)

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. 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 deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo's fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. 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, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that agbala was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title. And so 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. (Achebe, 1958, p.3)

The manner in which Okonkwo shuts out everything else and focuses solely on himself is evidence that his ambition has become a pitiful form of blinded obsession. In the character's very psyche, the stage is prepared for a sad career. This awful movement's accoutrements are backed by exterior reasons. Because of his own mental interpretation, Okonkwo's relationships with other individuals are out of whack. His impatience with others, and particularly with his son, Nwoye, reflects his own rigidity towards himself. (Innes and Lindfors, 1978: p. 12)

Okonkwo's family, including him, are expelled from the village for seven years due to a combination of arrogance and bad luck. In his absence, British colonialists have arrived and installed their own system of law and governance, and missionaries have begun to convert people to Christianity, making the intervening years epochal for the hamlet. Achebe depicts the colonial encounter as a location of oppression and emancipation for various segments within the colonized population. Achebe also reveals the subaltern discourses of marginalized Umuofian women who are subordinated in Igbo society. He said that

he belongs to the clan," he told her [Okonkwo's eldest wife]. "So look after him". "Is he staying long with us?" she asked. "Do what you are told, woman," Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. "When did you become one of the *ndichie* of Umuofia?" And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions." (Achebe, 1958: p.4)

Women are deemed inferior to men and denied education and some privileges. They are also prone to physical and emotional violence at the hands of their husbands and are frequently viewed as simple objects for men's pleasure. This inequality is depicted by Achebe through the Ekwefi character, the second wife of Okonkwo, who is enforced to experience physical harm by her husband. Due to societal standards, she is also denied the ability to pursue her aspirations and is forced to quit her passion for wrestling; (Whittaker and Misiska, :2007 p. 12)

Also, Achebe examines the marginalization of the non-Christian Igbo by Christian missionaries. The missionaries' presence marks a turning point in the narrative because they offer a new religion that challenges the Igbo society's beliefs and customs. Missionaries see the Igbo as savages and attempt to forcibly convert them to Christianity. This injustice is highlighted via Okonkwo's character, who sees the missionaries' arrival as a threat to the culture of Igbo and their simple life that will end in his suicide:

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. 'We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming.' The District Commissioner

changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs. 'Why can't you take him down yourselves?' he asked. 'It is against our custom,' said one of the men. 'It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offense against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we ask your people to bring him down, because you are strangers. (Achebe, 1958: p.68)

Okonkwo's family have returned to their home village after seven years of exile to discover that a lot of things are not the same. The Christian missionaries have erected a church, and many of the locals have converted to Christianity, abandoning their ancient practices. In a fit of rage, Okonkwo wishes to finish the church and the white men, but he and those who helped him are captured and detained for days. Okonkwo recognizes that the old way of life has ended upon their freedom. As a result of his sadness due to the lost customs, he commits suicide, thereby violating one of the oldest and most tenacious traditions, which forbade suicide. His clansmen are not permitted to fetch his body, and he cannot be buried with his family because he committed suicide. Accordingly, His body is now believed to be evil, and individuals from outside the clan only are permitted to touch it. Therefore, Obierika, Okonkwo's companion, begs the British District Commissioner if he will record it for them. He assigns some of his workers to perform the duty because he doesn't want it to be said that he stooped so low as to remove dead bodies. (Beesupogu, 2010: p. 6)

On the other hand, the relationship also affects the oppressed. For instance, women's roles are restricted and they are not offered the same opportunities as males. This restricts their potential and capacity to contribute to society. The narrator explained that

Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did his little children. 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 (Achebe, p.4).

In addition, the existing system of justice is frequently exploited to preserve the controlling and wealthy interests at the expense of the disadvantaged. The tale illustrates the downtrodden position in society. Women, children, and other members of society who are weaker are subject to the will of the dominant. Women are expected to be submissive to men, and their responsibilities are limited to

housework and parenting. It is assumed that children will obey their parents without inquiry. The powerful often exploit and marginalize the weaker members of society. (Ouarodima, 2018: pp. 110-115)

Things Fall Apart story shows a society in which the dominant position of men over women and the strong over the weak determines power relations. Okonkwo, the protagonist, is a guy who represents the values of masculinity and power and uses violence and aggression to retain his position in society. The story explores the impact of such repressive relationships on individuals and communities, as well as the marginalized's struggle for justice; (Deshwal, 2015: pp.609-611)

Okonkwo knew she was not speaking the truth. He walked back to his obi to await Ojiugo's return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess. (*Things Fall Apart*, p. 9)

Okonkwo punishes Ojiugo for ignoring the preparation of his evening meal, becoming so infuriated that he declines to halt even when warned that such fierceness disrupts the "sacred week." It is strange that Okonkwo is not afraid of divine punishment for his crime, given that he is so devoted to religion of Igbo. This irony discloses a substantial division between Okonkwo's devotion to his kin and his devotion to his personal power. From a poor beginning, he has climbed to become one of the most respected men in his society. By brutality, aggressiveness, and control over his wives and children, he maintains his status. Okonkwo's actions toward his family exemplifies how men in society want to retain their position by exercising dominance and control. (Landrier, 1993: pp. 3-4)

The story emphasizes the necessity for societies to build equitable structures that protect the poor and disenfranchised, promote equality and social relationships, and uphold justice. It demonstrates the significance of acknowledging the humanity of the downtrodden. In Igbo culture, marginalized individuals are frequently viewed as lesser human beings. This enables individuals in authority to justify their behavior and treatment of others. Nonetheless, the novel demonstrates that the oppressed are just as human as the powerful. Their humanity must be acknowledged, as they have their own experiences, ideas, and feelings. (Kenalemang, 2013: p. 4, 11, 13)

In a world, where the people are suppressed and marginalized by invaders, Okonkwo is a determined, industrious guy, who fights for success. He is a renowned leader in his community and a symbol of Igbo traditions. He ultimately fails to protect his people from the colonists and their repressive practices, despite his best attempts. Through his experiences, Achebe illustrates the difficulties the Igbo people experienced in their resistance against the colonialists. The missionaries and colonists in *Things Fall Apart* symbolize oppressive forces. They are driven by the aspiration to proliferate their religion and culture, in addition to get authority and control over the people of Igbo. Achebe demonstrates how their repressive activities, such as the eradication of traditional Igbo values and beliefs, have catastrophic consequences for the Igbo people and their way of life. Worse still is the news that Nwoye, Okonkwo's son, has embraced Christianity;

Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospect, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days, and his children the while praying to the white man's god. (Achebe, p.50)

Okonkwo is filled with dread as he conceives the 'eradication' of his tribe if all sons of Umuofia overlook their ancestry. Okonkwo conceives himself in the second life with his ancestors, awaiting in vain for his surviving sons to honor their elders. Okonkwo's vision of an impoverished hereafter helps to understand the extent of his existent dread: if the tribe is wiped out, Okonkwo will be entirely banished in death.

CONCLUSION

Achebe examines the marginal justice that exists in the colonial system. He demonstrates how the laws and punishments imposed by the colonizers are often perceived as unjust and biased towards the Igbo people who receive treatment compared to the colonizers. This underscores the power dynamics, between these two groups. Showcases the disparity in how the Igbo people are treated. Achebe delves into the impact of colonialism on the Igbo society and their way of life. In *Things Fall Apart* Chinua Achebe illustrates how the colonial forces dismantled the values, beliefs and social structures of the Igbo community leaving a lasting mark on their culture. The novel sheds light on the challenges faced by the Igbo people in resisting colonial policies while striving to uphold their values. Through his characters Achebe highlights the power struggles between the Igbo individuals and colonial powers as exposes instances of partial justice, within colonial rule.

The book serves as a reminder of how Igbo people fought against adversity and discrimination.

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