



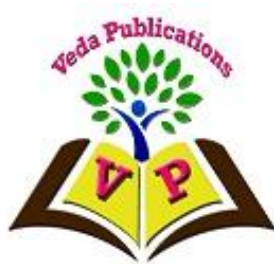
INTERPLAY OF CLASS AND POWER IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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ABSTRACT



The substantial potentiality of literature as a site to contest hegemony and arbitrary power structures has benefitted immensely from Postmodern theorist like Michael Foucault, Postcolonial critics like Edward Said, as well as Marxism. It helped deconstruct the various network of interconnecting links that assisted Empire sustain its imperial colonial designs in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), besides looking at the finer aspect of pre-colonial African life, is a scathing critique of colonialism and imperialism. The novel was inspired by a conscious will to help undo the psychological damage that the long foreign intervention had on the natives. A deconstructive gaze of the text lays bare the many power mechanisms that aided the entire exercise of Empire building in favor of the moneyed imperialist class against the natives and further looks at the relationship between the two. This paper is an attempt to deconstruct how the exercise of power takes different forms and help a small hegemonic class of white men to restrict, subvert and contain large rebellious native voices in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: *Power, Imperialism, Hegemony, Deconstruct and Class.*

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The substantial potentiality of literature as a site to contest hegemony and arbitrary power structures in modern times is most imminently conceived in those post colonial texts that seek to integrate, explore and investigate within the discursive space the power relation between the moneyed imperial class and the dispossessed colonized lot. Class and power share an exceedingly contiguous relational intercourse; while power can be exercised independent of class, an ideal state of unrestricted, stratified and effective command emerges when both consolidate to constitute a coherent whole. This ideal state at the same time masters propensity to unwittingly invite reverse power. This paper seeks to deconstruct how power emanates and is exercised by a small hegemonic class of white men to restrict, subvert and contain large rebellious native voices in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In the theoretical framework set by Marxist, Postcolonial and Post-modernist critics, it seeks to bring to fore the hidden patterns and the underlying trends that inform such relations. The term class has appeared across a range of disciplines-politics, literature, culture, sociology, biology and all them have different meanings for it. Howsoever in this paper, class (often referred interchangeably by its 'imperial' and 'colonial' nomenclature and by extension to 'colonizers' and 'imperialists') would be interpreted from the economic perspective of Marx and would be used in the context of the problematic relations between the alien whites of European blood and the black natives of African soil.

The Berlin Conference of 1884-85, that sought division of Africa amongst the many European powers (Britain, France, Germany, Portugal, Belgium etc), saw Nigeria under the possession of English. The English mission in Nigeria, as elsewhere in other colonies, worked at two levels- at the surface, on the meta-narrative of progress and civilization and the rightness of empire, it sought to civilize the natives and at a deeper level worked towards its commercial control. Ode Ogede, speaking of the effect this imperial, colonial rule had on Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, says that 'it led to the termination of the autonomy or self-rule' and brought about 'economic dispossessions, cultural confusion, or mental displacement, psychological

disorientation, and inferiority complexes' (Ogede 2). Achebe interrogates these effects that the imperial, colonial rule had over the natives of Africa in general and Nigeria in particular in his seminal work *Things Fall Apart*. A deeper analysis of the text also reveals how Achebe investigates the power relationship between the natives and the colonizer class and the economic and its multifaceted exploitation that came from it; and he realistically and convincingly brings out the conflict between the colonizers and the colonized 'from an insider's perspective through the employment of African brand of English, which is impregnated with African idioms, proverbs and cultural semiotics' (Naikar 11). The novel has been celebrated as a canon in post-colonial literature and been translated in many languages, inspiring a generation of writers and critics the world over. Harping on the efficacy of art to shape and serve social designs, Achebe says:

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." (Achebe 45).

True to his words, Achebe's prime concern in this novel seems not only to point out gross violence embedded in the imperial, colonial rule but also at decolonizing all aspects of African life, and in doing so shares a common vision of deep concern and commitment for the whole African continent with other African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'O and Wole Soyinka amongst others.

In his College de France course in 1975-76 Foucault notes that "power is never anything more than a relationship that can, and must, be studied only by looking at the interplay of the terms of the relationship". Power, according to Foucault, is omnipresent and can be found in all social interactions. A scrutiny of multiplicity of force relations immanent in the book's (*Things Fall Apart*) political, social and economic interactions communicate interesting distinctions on the exercise of power in its variegated aspects- sovereign, disciplinary and counter. The sovereign power of right to kill, the disciplinary power over actions are



wielded simultaneously to coerce people into submission, conditioned and regulated by the extremity of the situation. The wrestling combat in the introductory chapter is a far-fetched analogy to the power relationship, in it that it highlights what it means to engage with a chivalric opponent as opposed to a debased, powerful opponent. The former champion, though vanquished, never would resort to indignity, (for those are the rules of the clan that have been handed down to them from generation to generation), but the colonizers were very different. Umuofla refrained from unjust wars, we are told, wars that were fought to subdue and rule:

And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle - the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. And there were indeed occasions when the Oracle had forbidden Umuofia to wage a war. If the clan had disobeyed the Oracle they would surely have been beaten, because their dreaded *agadi-nwayi* would never fight what the Ibo call a fight of blame (Achebe 4)

Wars, for Umuofla, were sacred that demanded strict validation from the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves apart from being a justifiable act to their own self. Okonkwo's exile to Mbanta must consequently be understood as the tribe's honest attempt to filter indignant conducts in their midst. This ran in sharp contrast to the colonizers unprincipled ways to capsize and upset the 'Others', using all possible means that should come their way. It is through such dubious means that the encroachment of an alien church, government and commerce upon the established patterns of life is effected in Mbanta, Umuofla and elsewhere. Okonkwo realizes this toward the end of the novel and commits himself to suicide, but not before he plays his part in the great imperial game, a trait that serves to drive home the point how Okonkwos of the world would never stoop to its exploitative nature.

The bandwagon of new thoughts and laws that drives its way across every Igbo house through multi-layered engagements under the new government threatens indigenous structures of

authority with its enormous streak of complex machineries. Cognizance is taken to it that everyone bends to the new ways of life through the employment of various mechanisms that include both ideological and repressive. Those who stoop to go by the rules are welcomed into the new fold and those who contest this power find themselves marginalized within a culture of intimidation and naked violence. Economy, religion, culture, and law are rabidly pushed to exert and wield influence over the natives. The viability of enforcing itself without force as a strategic operation see them spend more and more money to the propagation of the new religion and converting the natives in to it as it facilitates ideological control over them. And this was a successful enterprise as it leads to major realignment of values in favor of not only the rulers but also the converted for it becomes a symbol of status, honor and prestige, notwithstanding the hybridity of it all. Okonkwo helplessly finds his own son Nwoye drift away to the religion of the usurpers and only ruminates in vain, "How then could he have begotten a son like Nwoye, degenerate and effeminate?" (Achebe 55). "Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up" (Achebe 51), but on real terms there was nothing that the natives could do. Of the ideological state apparatuses, it is not only religion but also law, family, culture, government and education that become the target of intervention, construction and reconstruction by the colonizers. Prior to the arrival of the white class, the natives were guided by their own age old tribal rules. And just like religion, this new system of governance functioned to contain and handicap the native way of life.

'Juridico-discursive' theory that entails power to take the form of a rule or law permitting and forbidding, legalizing and illegalizing under disciplinary interdiction manifests itself in numerous episodes in this novel. The native penchant for decentralized governance encounters the European's taste for uniformity of laws. The courts of law in the book distinguish in intervening and operating to discipline those who raise voice against the moneyed, imperialist class. The absence of a central authority and absolute laws that we witness in traditional Igbo



culture are replaced by a disciplined body of men whose pronouncements can only be matched in God's that they introduce. 'They had built a court where the District Commissioner judged cases in ignorance' (Achebe 62). After Okonkwo and ndichies (village elders) have been arrested, the District Commissioner informs them in no uncertain terms:

"We have brought a peaceful administration to you and your people so that you may be happy. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen" (Achebe 68).

This power is essentially discursive at the core and depends on 'what one can say as much as one can do' though such a discourse 'can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy', a thing which we later see in the Okonkwo's and other native's resistance to it. (Taylor 18). For now the baton to administer justice lay not with the village elders or the traditional laws but the new court of law introduced by the colonial class. The colonial administration now defined the parameters of peace, what best was good and suited the natives, what might bring them happiness and how justice be served. And justice was administered by either ideologically poisoning them or at another stage, having optimized its capabilities, by throwing them into prison or through the barrel of the gun. It is this form of justice that takes the life of Okonkwo. Umuofla loses much of its autonomy with the arrival of the colonizers- so powerful is the class, that not only its tribal laws and customs and traditions are watched in suspicion and sought to be discouraged and extirpated, but it's very people are not allowed to be assembled in meets in their very homeland. This disenfranchisement of the natives by restricting their movement and questioning their very right to assemble in their own village is not just a matter of identity but threaten their very existence and survival. In an interview to Raoul Granqvist in 1988, Achebe notes:

"This is what the Igbo people chose, the small village entity that was completely self-

governing....The reason why they chose it [this system] was because they wanted to be in control of their lives. So if the community says that we will have a meeting in the market place tomorrow, everybody should go there, or could go there. And everybody could speak (Cranquist 43).

But that freedom is no longer available to them under the new administration. The different facets of the administration, all connive to keep them marginalized. Another tool through which power was exercised is the domain of knowledge or the field of representation or misrepresentation. "To assume control over a territory or a nation was not only to exert political or economic power, it was also to have imaginative command" (Boehmer 5). Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) explicates the immense power and command that comes from the politics of imaginative representation. The multitude of discourses that emanated from the Empire, not just in the literary paradigm but also in other field like law reports, journalistic articles and anthropological journals worked towards an imaginary representation. 'Colonialism was not different from other kinds of authority, religious or political, in claiming a monopoly on definitions in order to control a diverse, unstable reality' (Boehmer 159). The colonial narrative renders a monolithic conception of their subject and in doing so exercise power out of it. The discursive attempt at 'Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger' is the orientalist's work in line with Joyce Cary's much praised novel *Mister Johnson* (1939) or Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) and must be understood in terms of power. The creation of the 'other' through the book of the District Commissioner will give added impetus to the power that they already hold. Such colonial narrative armed the moneyed class to control and subvert dissenting voice.

However, the challenges that emanates from the class do not go unchallenged. Foucault speaks of power as one that travels in all direction, to and fro. The avenging motif works to fill up the vacuum of power on the other side of the story that comes from the challenges of the imperialist class; thus while moneyed imperialist class exercise their



power, counter discourses from the colonized subjects serves as example of reverse power. Post colonial actualities, indigenous social consciousness and pride in its past pats the natives against changing realities of ruptured and disconnected functionality and wakes them up to the complex problematics of identity threatening survival and existence. Umuofia (microcosm of macrocosmic Africa) becomes the battleground for Okonkwo (microcosm of whole African people) to work in tandem with changing times towards perseverant counteracts against a highly organized class of elites. Rallying symbols of the past retrieve the colonized's nativeness and enable them to taken on the violent and exploitative history. When Okonkwo and his friend are shaved off their hair, Okonkwo constantly seeks vengeance against the 'class' and he is not afraid of going against all alone if the situation demands. "If Umuofia decided on war, all would be well. But if they choose to be cowards he would go out and avenge himself" (Achebe 70). His loyalty to the dictates of his clan is only matched by his fierce and unrelenting insistence on avenging the establishment that threatens African way of life. David Whittaker writes that *Things Fall Apart* was the "first Anglophone African novel to set out consciously to restore a sense of humanity and history to postcolonial Africa, and to document how Africans perceived the arrival of the colonizing Other" (Whittaker x-xi). An important aspect of this African perception is evinced in this novel when the author let us know how the Africans could look through the divide and rule artifice of the colonizers through the character of Obierika. He is quick to understand how trap had been laid to divide the tribesmen: "The whiteman 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 things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (Achebe 62). When the elders discover that a section of their society's loyalty to the clan was fast wavering, they decide on a radical course of action to fight back: "If we fight the stranger we shall hit our brothers and perhaps shed the blood of a clansman. But we must do it. Our fathers never dreamt of such a thing, they never killed their brothers. But a white man never came to

them. So we must do what our fathers would never have done" (Achebe 72). The vital links in the network of the tribal life that held them together in the spirit of brotherhood before the arrival of the alien government now lay shattered in the face of new challenges and if the clan and its people are to survive, they must act and act with deciding clarity. They now not only have to fight the white men but even that section of their tribe that were increasingly shifting on to the enemy's side. This resistance to power reaches its climax when Okonkwo would not surrender himself to the ruling class- all his life and action was devoted to the allegiance of his tribe and to uphold its values and thus when he commits suicide, he exercises his power against the class that seeks his subjugation. In doing so he refuses to be tried by the new court of law, by the new class of imperial powers, in accordance with his tribal disposition thereby retaining the sanctity of the land and its rules. His inflexible will that guards him against the Cat, and all misadventures that visits him propels him towards suicide. The power and the standing of the imperial class approbates dense and opaque network of vigilance, something which one sees but a little at a time. But Okonkwo could see that the whole episodes was not conducive to the natives, that the succeeding episodes navigated them towards a situation where they might lose all their powers, that his village sat on the edge of obligatory and absolutist subjugation that seriously jeopardized identity and survival. From such margins of the traditional culture, role emerges counter-power. The enactment of suicide serves to entail that reprobation and reverse power.

The novel is an excellent study on the interrogation of the power relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Mechanisms including law, religion, education, prison, police and others, when combined with strong economic base, can be a disastrous force to reckon with. Howsoever, it has also very often been seen that power invites reverse power. If the colonial, imperial class exercise their power, than we also see reverse exercise of power by the colonized natives in the novel. Challenges do not go unchallenged, but are matched with intense passion.

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