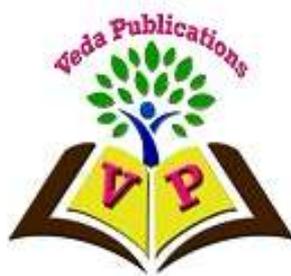


**CULTURAL CONTEXT IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S 'THINGS FALL APART'**

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In this paper , the researcher likes to present the conflict that existed between the two cultures namely the Nigerian Igbo culture and the European culture created sparks in the imagination of the author Chinua Achebe. This article presents how Achebe's novel directs the misleading of the European novels that depict Africans as savages into a whole new light from an African perspective. He wanted to change the impression held in much of the Western world that African cultures were simple, one-dimensional, and impossible to understand. He wanted Nigerians and other African citizens to take pride in their wealth of cultural experience and history and value the same as he brings in the cultural context through the various aspects of traditions, customs, myths, proverbs economic status, family, religion and law .

Keywords: *Cultural gap- Nigerian Traditions- Customs-Myths- Law.*



The individuals write their books as how they are always influenced by their society. Therefore, it is important to consider a work's cultural context. Culture can refer to the beliefs, customs, values, and activities of a particular group of people at a particular time. Substance produced by a given culture express these values in both open and unconscious ways. Works of literature are the best way to present one's culture in profundity. Cultural context looks at the society the characters that live in, at how their culture can affect their behaviour and their opportunities. It thinks about where and when each text is set, thinks about the values and attitudes that matter to these characters and about how they formed these beliefs. It checks if their culture has influenced them.

The most powerful forces in a society include religion, gender roles, attitudes towards sex and marriage, social status or class, job opportunities or emigration, (wealth or poverty), stereotypes or ethnic identity. The culture of a people is what marks them out distinctively from other human societies in the family of humanity. Culture is the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. Although culture — like religion — moulds the individual, it is its relativism and ethnocentrism that is the bane of humanity. Culture...refers to the totality of the pattern of behaviour of a particular group of people. It includes everything that makes them distinct from any other group of people for instance, their greeting habits, dressing, social norms and taboos, food, songs and dance patterns, rites of passages from birth, through marriage to death, traditional occupations, religious as well as philosophical beliefs. Culture is passed on from generation to generation.

The child just grows into and within the cultural heritage of his people. He imbibes it. Culture, in traditional society, is not taught; it is caught. The child observes, imbibes and mimics the action of his elders and siblings. This shows that every human being who grows up in a particular society is likely to

become infused with the culture of that society, whether knowingly or unknowingly during the process of social interaction. In this paper, we shall be dealing with African culture and drawing examples from Nigerian Igbo culture. African culture, therefore, refers to the whole lot of African heritage. We could see that African culture embraces the totality of the African way of life in all its forms and ramifications.

For a long time the story of Africa is told most exclusively through the words of the European writers that began to change when the African countries achieved Independence and the African writers began to tell their own stories. Chinua Achebe had his early education in native missionary English medium school where he also learnt his Bible. However he was extremely interested in the early folk tales narrated by his elder sister. Thus he was exposed to cross road culture. After his completion of bachelor's degree in Ibadan University, Achebe went to England for his higher studies for more than six years and calls this period as a period of 'Self imposed exile'. He had the unique advantage of having witnessed the three land marks through which Africa passed. The departing glory of Africa as it passed through the colonial times, the heady pre-independence era and the post-independent period. He also witnessed the stages of disillusionment which many African countries have experienced. After his return from London studies he wrote 'Things Fall Apart' in 1958. This book in particular has become the classic of world literature, translated in fifty languages selling a eleven million copies . Chinua Achebe was only twenty eight when he wrote this book and it was his first novel. Achebe is the product of both Igbo culture and the European culture.

On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of 'Things Fall Apart' in his interview in Washington when asked for the reason of what he set out to do fifty years ago and why he wrote 'Things Fall Apart' he said,

" I knew that something needed to be done, that was my place in the world, my story. The story of my self, the story of my people."

He said that initially he wasn't questioning Christianity, the religion of his parents. He considered it to be good and very valuable religion for them. Later discovered that perhaps it was not completely



the whole. He said, "There was no attempt to understand what was behind the Igbo religion. You simply dismissed us the worship of stones".

People in different parts of the world find that 'Things Fall Apart' resonates their own history. Author Chinua Achebe's novel was written for both Western and African readers. 'Things Fall Apart' is an response to European novels that depicted the Africans as savages who needed to be enlightened by the Europeans. Achebe presents to the readers his people's history with both strengths and imperfections by describing for instance, Igbo festivals the worship of their gods and the practices in their ritual ceremonies, their rich culture and other social practice, the colonial era that was both stopping Igbo culture and also brought some benefits to their culture.

Chinua Achebe, commenting on the role of the writer as a teacher in "African Writers Talking" (1972), notes:

"What I think a novelist should teach is something very fundamental, namely to indicate to his readers, to put it crudely that we in Africa did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans." Thus "a writer has a responsibility to try and stop this, because unless our culture begins to take itself seriously, it will never take off the ground".

"This" is in reference to the misleading notion that Africa, as a "dark continent", needs to be illuminated by Westernization.

The setting of the novel is in the outskirts of Nigeria in a small fictional village, Umuofia just before the arrival of the Europeans into their land. The villagers did not know how to react to the sudden cultural changes the Europeans tried to bring in with their new missionary zeal, economic development and political structures and institutions. This essay aims at analyzing the cultural context at the advent of the European colonization on Igbo society. He educates readers extensively about the Igbo's myths and proverbs. The novel deals with the story of the protagonist Okonkwo, a powerful man and his downfall. He is famous because of his "solid personal achievements". He signifies his attribute towards the cultural patterns of

the Igbo tribe right from the beginning of the novel. But his doom at the end of the story is remarkably related to the patterns of the culture of the Igbo which he wanted to preserve though there is a disruption of the ethics caused by the missionaries. The sort of relations of the human being with tradition and the farming activities are displayed in the novel through the culture of Igbo. The Ibo society unlike the traditional societies was not chiefly directed but achievement oriented. A man could not inherit title and rank from his family but had to achieve by his own abilities. Okonkwo's whole life was dominated by fear - "The fear of failure and weakness." the hero despite his father's shameful reputation like whom he never wished to be was a self-made man with pride and confidence, a respected leader within the Ibo community of Umuofia. Okonkwo at a very young age brought honour to his village when he wrestled and threw to the ground Amalinze, who was nick named the cat. A man's wealth was measured by the yams and cowries he possessed. Children, wives and land were all symbols of wealth. In Ibo society, a man could keep more than one wife. Okonkwo though young, was already a wealthy farmer of yams - a sacred crop and had three wives which were all indicators of wealth and 'manliness'. For Okonkwo, 'yam' stands for masculinity: "Yam stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed".

In Ibo society, there is a wide division between the masculine and feminine actions and responsibilities. Respect and success are based on only manly activities and accomplishments; whereas domestic chores like taking care of children and hens are left to the women folks. This is evident in Okonkwo's prosperity in his household. He owned a large compound, and his three wives had their own 'Obi' and each of them built a small attachment to her. One of the most significant social markers of the Ibo society was the unique system of honorific titles. As a man becomes wealthy, he gains additional recognition and prestige by 'taking a title.' Titles are not conferred but they are purchased. Taking a title is a sign of manliness and superiority, an 'Osugo' or a low-ranked person was not respected in the society. In the Igbo society, tribal laws are also very important



but proves destructive. Ikemefuna, who was sent as a peace emissary to the village of Umuaro, as per the direction of the 'oracle of the hills and the caves' was to be killed (chapter-VII). Okonkwo is advised by Ezeudu not to "bear a hand in his death". But Okonkwo decided to stick to tradition at any cost and mercilessly murdered him. Thus, Ikemefuna becomes a victim of tribal law.

Despite Ibo society being male dominated, women played an important role in it. Her status depended on how many children she bore and how many were male. As Ekwefi says 'woman's crowning glory.' All preparations for ceremonies and celebrations are carried out by the women within the village and also with other villages. They play an important role in creating social ties. The Ibo society with its multi-division both internal and external, was an added advantage for the white man with his religion and culture to make inroads into the Ibo world. The white man whom the Igbo's considered 'lepers' brought with them their own religion, i.e., Christianity, influencing the natives, thus they abandoned their own religion. The novel thus deals with the theme of disintegration of the Ibo native culture. As the Christians began to gain power, the villagers saw their traditional beliefs as increasingly outdated and powerless and endangered. The Igbo's believed that twins were a bad omen. They were put in earthenware pots and thrown in the 'Evil Forest', but the new religion offered support and acceptance to those considered outcasts by the natives. Thus, the missionaries were successful in making their way into the traditional Ibo society, leading to chaos and confusion among the products of hybrid culture including Nwoye, Okonkwo's own son. Nwoye, abandons the traditional ways and joined the Christians.

In traditional Ibo religion, the ancestral spirit communicated through the mask in which it speaks. The Ibo's believed that during this time the human underneath the mask is not present; the mask is transformed into the spirit. Thus, unmasking the 'Egwugwu' kills the ancestral. On one such occasion which was held annually, where the Ibo clan held a sacred ceremony to honour the Earth deity, the 'Egwugwu' or the ancestral spirits of a clan, dance in

the tradition of the celebration. His inflexible nature at the end made him destined for self-destruction.

The customary law with which the people punished the defaulters and avenged was strong. The killing of Mbiano, wife of Ogbuefi Udo of Umofia by their neighbouring village aroused anger amongst the villagers. Umofia was feared by all the neighbouring villages. The story about the medicine 'agadi-nwayi,' or old woman reflects the belief of the people in spirits. Consulting spirits as the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves, who is addressed as 'Agbala' shows the early sacrifices and the traditional belief of the Igbo's. In this novel we find Unoka sacrificing cock to 'Ani,' the owner of all land, for good harvest and at the shrine of 'Ijejioku,' the god of yams. The people observed strict cultural practices. They were not to speak harsh words during the 'Week of peace,' a week before planting crops, so as to appease the great goddess of the Earth. But Okonkwo broke it by beating his youngest wife. So, as instructed by the priest, Okonkwo had to offer one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. Such specific sacrificial objects and animals show the age-old religious practices of the Igbo people.

The yam feast symbolizes the harvest and prosperity of the Igbo people. People who harvest more yams were more wealthy. So Okonkwo's prosperity as a titled man of fame is seen in his "stacks of yams," sheds for goats and hens he kept in his compound. The passing of days and seasons were calculated basing on the season of yam cultivation. Even the growth of the young lad Ikemefuna is described as "He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season, and was full of the sap of life".

The Ibo's believed if locusts descend upon their village, they will have good harvest. The descending of locusts signified good harvest. The locusts descended on Umofia like a "boundless sheet of black cloud drifting towards Umofia" and covered half the sky and broke like 'shining star-dust.' Achebe presents it as a 'tremendous sight, full of power and beauty' generation to generation.

The nine villages of Umofia gathered together on certain days to dispute cases. On one such occasion they settled the matter of a couple, Uzowulu and his wife. The nine Egwugwu, went away to



consult together in their house and the matter was settled with the command to Uzowulu, to go to his in-laws with a pot of wine and beg his wife to return to him. It is *pot* bravery, when a man fights with a woman. They share mutual understanding and have a we-feeling when it comes to settling family disputes. And so, though they represent different villages, they were bounded under the same law.

CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe's novels have helped to develop what I known as African Literature today. He has written novels exploring his tradition and culture, while still staying true to his roots. The most important transformation of any society is the cultural transformation and thus through the various changes in the cultural context Achebe has enlightened his readers about the Igbo society. Nelson Mandela, the father of Africa has also referred to Achebe as a writer in whose company the prison walls fell down. All Achebe did with his pen are nothing but miracles and magic. Achebe is regarded as an irreplaceable legend of Africa.

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