

Clash of Native Versus Colonial Culture in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Things Fall Apart is one of the most influential novels of its time, both on a local and global scale in order to fully understand the novel and its contents it is important to look into the history of the novel that led to its publication. When Nigeria became a colony of Britain in 1906, the country became exposed to the British political structure and its various institutions. Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 almost a quarter of a century after the British assumed direct control of Nigeria. Although Achebe parents at that time had been converted to Christianity, his grandparents were still firm in their traditional culture. It is under these circumstances that Achebe then came to know of both the British culture as well as Nigerian culture. Since neither of them understood the other's culture and neither of them was willing to abandon their own beliefs to follow the beliefs of the other, it can be assumed that there was a lot of tension. Keeping this view in his mind, Achebe said, "in an interview that the conflict that existed between these two cultures created sparks in his imagination. This resulted in the birth of his novel Things Fall Apart." Understanding Culture and defining it is quite challenging as it is considered to be more subjective. Not even the simple definition—'a people's way of life, often influenced by their religion is accepted today. The cultural viewpoint denotes that conflict appears due to clashes in the values; the socio- psychological perspective that conflict is caused by the clashes in status; and the pertinent source views that conflict is caused by the never ending struggle over lucrative resources.

The setting of the novel is in the outskirts of Nigeria is a small fictional village, Umuofia just before the arrival of white missionaries into their land. As the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia, its unexpected villagers do not know how to react to the sudden cultural changes that the missionaries threaten to bring with their new political

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structure and institutions. Hence, this essay aims at analyzing the effects of European colonizers on Igbo Culture. Achebe's primary purpose of writing the novel is to give readers an insight into Igbo society right before the white missionaries on their land. The invasion of the colonizing force threatens to change almost every aspect of Igbo society: from religion traditional gender roles and relations to family structure and trade. Abiola Irele aptly comments on the use of cultural clash by Achebe in his debut novel as: the immediate subject of Chinua Achebe's novels is the tragic consequences of the African encounter with the Europe.... His novels deal with the social and psychological conflicts created by the incursions of the white man and his culture into the hitherto self-contained world of African society and the disarray in the African consciousness that has followed.

In the novel, Achebe clearly depicts this cultural conflict and its consequences. The novel is divided into three parts; in part first the richness of the Igbo culture is described in all sides. It is done through the story of Okonkwo, the protagonist and the heroic leader of the warlike Umuofia clan. Yet what happens to Okonkwo is not of central importance, rather it is what happens to the clan. This clan consists of nine villages of which Umuofia was the chief one. In the first part there are vivid descriptions of the gods and oracles, myths, beliefs superstitions, laws and administrations, festivities of the clan. It also tells the story of Okonkwo's rise in the clan from the son of a failure to one of the lords of the clan.

Till the end of the first part in chapter thirteen we witness the glory of the Igbo world which was untouched of any external influence. Okonkwo unintentionally kills a kinsman and is banished (expelled out) from his clan in keeping with the law of the land. With this we come to second part and Okonkwo to the village of Mhanta, his motherland. The second and third part shows the intrusion of the white men into Igbo land and its ramifications. The white men entered into the closed communal Igbo world occasionally. We hear the stories of white men that have arrived in distant parts of the Igbo land. Obierika tells the story of white men's menace in the Abame market. A white man had arrived in Abame with his iron horse (bicycle). At first the people of Abame wondered to see this strange looking white man, they thought he was a man at all? They also feared his iron horse so they tied it to a

tree and killed that man. After a few days, some white people accompanied by Igbo man from other clans retaliated by shooting freely in populated market of Abame. In his second visit to Okonkwo, Obierika tells that the missionaries had come to Umuofia and they have built a church there. Through the Umuofians were not happy with what was happening they permitted white men to live there. The fear of Abame massacre (mass slaughter) and their chauvinistic belief in Igbo gods who will potentially destroy the strangers prevented them from opposing the invaders.

The missionary in Umuofia Mr. Brown learned a great deal about the clans through his meetings with a village elder Akunna. This knowledge would be useful for dealing with the Igbo. The narrator expresses this as: “In this way Mr. Brown learned a good deal about religion of the clan and he came to the conclusion that a frontal attack on it would not succeed. And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family egging people to send their children to his school. But at first they only sent their slaves or sometimes their lazy children. Mr. Brown begged and argued and prophesied” (TFA132). In addition to churches and schools they also started trading centers to attract more people to them. Hitherto, crops were seen as seed or food but these trade centers opened the doors of prosperity by playing price for them in the form of money. This was next step in solidifying their stand in Igbo land. The trading centers lured people thus: “the white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia.” (TFA130) after that much success in loosening the center that held the Igbo together it was now time to break them by exacting power. This is how they started governing Umuofia: but apart from the church, the white man 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 These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed. (TFA127). Brian Shaffer rightfully criticizes this role of the missionaries in the Igbo land as: *Things Fall Apart* reveals the great extent to which religious missionaries were part of a comprehensive strategy of colonization, in which the Church functioned

as a beachhead for political and economic imperialism Paradoxically, the “imagined process of civilization that British believed they were giving to the savages” is instead revealed in *Things Fall Apart* lead to cultural disintegration and social chaos; the breakdown of Igbo society. (81, 82)

The novel describes Africa that includes Okonkwo’s life proving the misunderstanding of the white people of the complex African culture. Okonkwo’s tragedy described in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is thus the tragedy of the Igbo culture itself that falls apart under the new dominating white wave. Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith are both instruments in this destruction. The attainment of the primitive tribes is a typical phrase for the colonialist who were convinced that the African were savage people who needed their salvation, while Achebe’s novel proves exactly the opposite, through the insight into real African tradition and culture.

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