

Colonialism and Africa: A Study of Chinua Achebe's Novel Things Fall Apart

Abstract

Colonialism has played havoc with the lives of the people around the world. Colonialism not only thrust inferiority complex on the people, but also convinced them that their race, their ancestors did not create anything in the world. Their people were unable to nurture a civilization and a culture. According to the colonial masters histories of these invaded lands started with the arrival of the invaders, prior to that there was a huge vacuum which contained nothing. In other words, all the achievements of these people were undermined by the colonialists. The postcolonial writers have started writing back to the masters. These writers are now coming up with their stories, but the bigger aim of these writings is to reclaim their culture and history. The current paper studies the novel Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe.

Keywords: Culture, Colonialism, Europeans, Africans, Civilization.

Introduction

Whenever a survey of most corrupt countries is published, the top states are often allotted to the countries that have a history of colonial subjugation by the European countries. What is the reason behind corruption prevalent in these countries? When people look for the reasons they come up with different theories. The most common promise is that the people living in these countries are inherently corrupt or their culture enhances corruption, so in these theories the blame of corruption is put on natives of their countries.

However, what remains hidden from the population of the world is that the colonial powers were responsible for the de-culturation of natives. The culture that is found in the postcolonial countries is not the original one, rather is a culture that was imposed by the colonial masters. The native cultures were "collectivistic" (Pal, Virender, 2013, 22). The colonial masters made it sure that this collectivistic culture was replaced by individual culture of Europe. Similar was the case with the native religion. Which was shown to be a "Bundle of arcane beliefs and customs" (Pal, Virender, 2011, 254 Misconception about Native Religions). Now because Culture and religions are closely associated so the people who converted to the religion of the white man were also de-cultured. This de-culturation leads to the spread of corruption among the natives.

Study Duration

The study for the paper was done during the period between 2017 and 2018. The researcher did not come across any relevant paper published after 2014.

Objective of the Study

With the advent of postcolonial writings, a new world view about these once enslaved countries is forming. People across the world are now reading the writings of these people and are appreciating their concerns. The writings of these postcolonial writers have created a new community of readers and a transformation among that reading community is taking place. The readers are

now realizing that African people were not cannibalistic barbarians as portrayed by the whites, rather they were highly civilized. Their knowledge of their surroundings was great. The paper studies how colonial writers made negative images of the natives through their biased accounts.

Review of Literature

The influence of colonialism has been documented and studied by many scholars and foremost among them is the writer Chinua Achebe



Priti

Assistant Professor,
Deptt. of English,
Geeta Degree College,
Shera, Panipat,
Haryana

himself. In his essays "The role of Burden of the Black Writer" and "An Image of Africa" (1975) he provided Writer in a New nation" (1964), "The material to the writers of postcolonial countries. Similarly Virender Pal has published some important papers on the native literature. In his paper "Misconceptions about Native Religions" (2011) he discusses how native religions were degraded by the colonial masters without developing a deep understanding about them. In his another paper "'Possessed' of Spirits, Dispossessed of Land: An Australian Aboriginal Perspective" (2013) he has discussed the impact of rapacious exploitation of natural resources of the native lands by the whites. In his paper "Historiography, colonialism and the Aborigines: A Study of Liam Davison's The White Woman" (2013) he studies the manipulation of native history by the invaders. In the paper entitled "Salvaging Culture and Community: Uncertain Reclamation in Kim Scott's True Country" (2014) he studies how the native writers have taken up the process of reclaiming their culture.

The books and theories given by the whites about the corruption in the colonized countries are misleading and are a result of colonial short-sightedness of the colonial masters.

And in most of the postcolonial countries history "has only been a monologue by the settlers, where the natives are present only in periphery, either as the beasts of burden and guide to penetrate the unchartered territories for the settlers or as the obstacles in the proliferation of civilization (Pal, Virender, *Historiography*, 2013, 138).

Thus the native or the postcolonial writers have started writing their own version to correct the versions perpetrated by the colonial white writers. One of the most important postcolonial writers in the sense is Chinua Achebe, the man who gave a shape to postcolonial writing and successfully used his pen the correct the image of his country, culture and African continent.

In a lecture untitled "The Role of writer in a New Nation" he made a point and presented his bellow African writers with a greater challenge:

It is inconceivable to me that a serious writer could stand aside from this debate or be indifferent to this argument which calls his full humanity in question. For me at any rate, there is a clear duty to make a statement. This is my answer to those who say that a writer could be writing about contemporary issues about politics in 1964 about city life, about the last coup d'etat. Of course, these are legitimate themes for a writer but as far as I am concerned the fundamental theme must first be disposed of. This theme -put quite simply - is that African people did not hear about culture for first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beastly that they had poetry and

above all they had dignity. It is the dignity that African people lost in the colonial period and they must regain. The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing what happened to them and what they lost. (Achebe 1964)

In fact, it is evident from Achebe's writing that aim of his writing is to present the truthful picture of his people and shatter the negative stereotypes and images of the Africans perpetrated by the Europeans. One important method of resistance postcolonial writers employ involves "rewriting canonical texts to battle the effectiveness as agents of colonial is ideology" (Pal, Virender, 2010, *Poles Apart*). Chinua Achebe further elaborates in "The Black writer's Burden":

Without subscribing to the view that Africa gained nothing at all in her long encounters with Europe, one could still say, in all fairness, that she suffered many terrible and lasting misfortunes. In terms of human dignity and human relations the encounter was almost a complete disaster for the black races. It has warped the mental attitudes of both black and white. In giving expression to the plight of their people, black writers have shown again and again how traumatic experience can possess the sensibility. They have found themselves drawn irresistibly to writing about the fate of black people in a world progressively recreated by white man in his own image, to their glory and their profit, in which negro became the poor motherless child. (Achebe, Chinua 1966)

In his novels, Chinua Achebe has documented how the white intervention and rule changed Nigerian society over the decades. In his classical postcolonial novel *Things Fall Apart*, he tells the readers who the Nigerian society in Umuofia changed within a decade of the arrival of the whites:

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not fells strongly as Okonkwo about the now dispensation. The white man has indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he has also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and pernel became things of great price, and much money flowed in to Umuofia. (130)

The things like money were unknown to the people in this society. The society was based on barter system where everybody toiled hard to earn a living. In this society a person has to toil hard to earn

a living in the Village. The lazy people are not respected:

You, Unoka, are known in all the clean for the weakness of your matchet and hoe. When your neighbors go out with the axe to cut down the virgin forests, you saw your yams on the exhausted farms that take no labour to clear. They cross seven rivers to make their farms, you stay at home and offer sacrifices to the reluctant soil. Go home and work like a man. (16)

Thus the land of Africa was peopled by brave and hard working race, but while writing about the impact of whites on Nigerian society, Achebe also writes about the weakness of the society. In fact, what Achebe describes a weakness is not a weakness in the real sense of the world, but when confronted by the whites it proves to be a weakness. This weakness is the liberty or adapting a liberal attitude when confronted by an aggressive missionary religion like Christianity. The "Ibo culture or the African culture respects diversity" (Pal, Virender, 2010, Poles Apart). Ironically, it makes clear that the Africans were more accommodating than the whites, but this disintegration of the society and creeping of vices into the character of the people. This could be understood by the difference in attitudes of the natives and the people who have converted to the white man's religion. The converts used derogatory language for the religion of their ancestors.

Three converts had gone in to the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines (141).

On the other hand, the natives keep on cultivating the same pluralistic and liberal attitude towards these people. The converts to the new religion tear the mask of eqwugwu, but the Africans still stay all encompassing and tell the Converts and the whites:

You can stay with us if you like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you. (138)

The African writers have realized their mistake and have started correcting those mistakes. Most of the African writers have realized that the people in Africa are no longer African rather they are pseudo whites who have been conditioned to follow the culture and mannerisms of the Europeans. The intellectual Africans started the movement of de-conditioning the people and the movement started with these culturally conscious writers. For instance Chinua Henry Achebe started by dropping "Henry" from his name. Chinua Achebe was conscious enough to realize that if Africa has to reclaim its

culture and start a cultural Renaissance in Africa then it has to start with the self. Thus Chinua Henry Achebe ancestors were converted to Christianity his ancestors a shunned their religion and beliefs because they were cheated by the white man to accept his religion. Chinua Achebe elaborates:

But he says that our customs are bad; and our own brothers who have taken up his religion also say 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 peaceable with 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. (129)

Religion and belief systems were the greatest unifying factors in the society. So when the white man converted a few people from the society, a deep chasm developed in the society, a permanent division was created in the society. Dropping of 'Henry' from the name shows that Chinua Achebe was deeply aware of the importance of reviving the traditional beliefs in the society. So that Nigerians can again become one, the imported religion can only divide; unity can only be achieved by the native beliefs.

In this novel Achebe brings out the reality of the "lunatic religion" (130) of the whites. In a debate between the tribal elder Akunna and Missionary Mr. Brown, Achebe establishes the superiority of Nigerian religion:

You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth, 'said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods.'

There are no other gods 'said Mr. Brown.' "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood – like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved *Ikenga* hung) and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood.

'yes, said Akunna.' It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But he made them for his messengers so that we could approach him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your Church. (131)

The discussion on between the tribal elder and the missionary makes clear that the white man deliberately misinterpreted the religions and religious beliefs of the society to divide the society.

This fallacy of misinterpreting other cultures has been clearly exposed by Cole and Sribner:

But carrying such theories overseas without some awareness of their cultural roots and their very limitations, even in the cultures in which they arose carries with it the risk of experimental ego centrism mistaking as universals the particular organizations of cognitive skills that have arisen in the historical circumstances of our own society, and interpreting their absence in other cultures as "deficiency." (Cole & Scribner, 1974, 200)

The process of reclaiming the roots is not restricted only to Chinua Achebe. Another important writer Ngugi WA Thiong'o followed the suit. He changed his original name James Ngugi to Ngugi WA Thiong'o to highlight his African roots. He asserts:

In the era of imperialism where do we really stand? In a society built on a structure of inequality where do we stand? Can we remain neutral cocooned in our libraries and scholarly disciplines. (105)

Conclusion

Thus the novel *Things Fall Apart* is a vehicle for "social transformation" (Pal, Virender, 2014, vol.7, IJAS, PP-155-168). The novel not only clears the misconception about the African to the outside, but also tries to wake Africans to the problems created by the imperial masters. The novel shatters negative

stereotyped and tries to wake Africans to their great cultural heritage.

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