

**THE ANALYSE OF IGBO SOCIETY WHICH IS BEFORE AND AFTER
THE ARRIVAL OF WHITE MISSIONARIES IN UMUOFIA: A STUDY OF
THE EFFECTS OF THEIR ARRIVAL CONCERNING IGBO CULTURE,
CONSEQUENTLY LEADING TO THE CLASH OF CULTURES BETWEEN
THE TWO PARTIES IN THE NOVEL *THINGS FALL APART***

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ABSTRACT

Things Fall Apart was the strong answer of Chinua Achebe towards the European novelist who has been depicted Africans as savages, uncivilized and barbaric. To present the good sides of African people's history Achebe did exhibit Igbo festivals, the worship of their Gods and the practices of African religion's ritual ceremonies. As an African writer Achebe's aim was to proclaim the diverse and rich culture and social practices to the white people who did underestimate the potentiality of the native Africans. Therefore this novel actually has been written to create the new light with its portrayal of Igbo society and also did examine the aftermath of European colonialism on Igbo society from African perspectives. Hence this paper will elucidate an insight of post colonialism on Igbo society, as well as the interaction between the whites and the black people's negative and positive consequences. Achebe's main purpose to write this novel *Things Fall Apart* was to show the good side and impressive life style of Igbo society to the European society.

KEYWORDS: Igbo Society, White Missionaries, Umuofia, Post Colonialism, European Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

Being a Nigerian author Chinua Achebe wrote his influential novel in 1958. This novel was the tribute to the entire black race. The setting of this novel was in the outskirts of Nigeria and the particular place of the main setting was in a small fictional village Umuofia. The villagers of Umuofia were leading a free and peaceful life inside of their village with their own clan's people. But due to the unexpected arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia, the villagers became shocked and they didn't able to know that how to react after knowing about the missionaries who did compel and gave them threat to change their own culture and converted themselves with the new political structure and institution. Therefore, this paper will analyse the effects of European colonization on Igbo culture. Most of the European states migrated to Africa and other parts of the world with the intention to establish their colonies and it was happened towards the end of the nineteenth century. Among those captured place for establishing the European colonies, Nigeria was one of them. But like other African nations, Nigeria has received visitors who used to come on a colonising mission and as a whole they imposed their religion and culture on Igbo society. When the white people's culture was about to merge into the culture of Nigerian people, their own culture has perished. Likewise, in this novel, the culture of Umuofia was

immensely threatened by the European cultures.

Achebe's primary purpose of writing this novel was to show that he wanted to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African. *Things Fall Apart* actually provided the readers with an insight of Igbo society and the invasion of the colonising force that menaced towards every aspects of Igbo society. From religion, traditional gender roles and relations with family structure to trade consequently, Achebe gave blames to the white missionaries' colonial rule and invasion for the post-colonial oppressed Igbo culture. Furthermore, Achebe made the readers sensible about the Igbo society's myths and proverbs. Achebe was the first African writer who wrote this novel *Things Fall Apart* completely about the Africans and their cultures. Before Achebe mostly the European writers described Africans as savages, uncivilized and uneducated. The Europeans considered themselves as more advanced than Africans, and were determined to help Africans to convert from the ancient era into the modern era of civilization and education. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, basically was a novel which has been written from the perspectives of colonialism. In this novel Conrad did present the picture of Africa as wild, dark and uncivilized continent. Based on the descriptions of Africa and its people by Conrad, we came to know that why Achebe and other African writers began to emerge and tell their story of Africa and its people. Achebe wrote *Things Fall apart* to prove to the Europeans the value of the African culture. In the writing of *Things Fall Apart* Achebe described the history of Igbo and he did like that by describing both the perfections and imperfections of their culture and traditions that made them different from Western cultures. For example, their beliefs in the power of ancestral Gods, the sacrifice of young boys, the killing of twins and the oppression of women were the signature traits of the African community which Achebe did portray in this novel. The main focus of this paper will deal with the analyse of Igbo society as it appeared in the novel, which was before and after the arrival of white missionaries in Umuofia; the effects of their arrival concerning Igbo culture, consequently leading to the clash of cultures between the two parties. I have intended to incorporate the postcolonial criticism which would help to analysis the novel.

DISCUSSION ON POST-COLONIALISM FROM DIFFERENT CRITICS

The term post colonialism is vast; therefore some famous critics did the significant criticism on this domain. To analysis the deepest meaning of post colonialism, Ashcroft remarked about the important side of meaning of post colonialism.

"Most texts give the definition of colonialism before they define the meaning of the term post colonialism. Colonialism as defined by OED refers to "the policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically. Therefore, post-colonialism is sometimes assumed to refer to "after colonialism" or "after-independence" (Ashcroft et al. 12)

McEwan also gave the definition of post colonialism, he said,

"Describing the wide range of social, cultural and political events arising specifically from the decline and fall of European colonialism that took place after World War II" (McEwan 18)

To compare with the term colonialism, Post-colonialism means the opposite idea of colonialism. The post colonial writings depend on the theory of post colonialism; hence the literature of post-colonialism is a consequence of colonialism. For example, we got the idea of post colonialism through the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. This was a novel which has been written under the colonial rule in response to the effects of colonialism on African culture, therefore the

culture of Chinua Achebe. Achebe wrote back at the writings of European writers and the misrepresentation of Africa in their writings. Post-colonial writers usually attempt to write about how their rich, innovative and native cultures have been destroyed under the power of imperialism. Actually post colonialism is the process of unfriendliness and reform. The development of divisions within the elite societies that are based on discriminations as varied as race, language or religion. In a heterogeneous society, a society which is based on many different ethnic and racial groups, social classes, and languages, dialects and cultural traditions and heritage. The activities of post colonial writers refer to rearrange new ethnic and cultural meanings to the groups of people that are treated as indifferent by their society and culture. This will help them to focus towards the preservation of the elements of their culture that still exist. However, the literature does not depict the colonised nations or people as victims of colonialism, but rather it exhibit that, they are aimless about their sense of belonging. As a result most of the colonised individuals do not know whether to follow their own culture or the culture of the coloniser. Because of this they find themselves merging within the elements of the two different cultures which make them move back and forth in between their present and past lives, hence their confused sense of belonging. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* will show this confused sense of belongings throughout the novel.

THE MAIN GIST OF THE NOVEL THINGS FALL APART

The title *Things Fall Apart* has been borrowed from William Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" (1921).

"Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity".

Achebe was influenced by this poem of Yeats and made his novel's name as *Things Fall Apart*. However this novel was based on the life of the protagonist named Okonkwo. As the novel evolved, Okonkwo accidentally killed a man and he and his family were exiled from Umuofia. During his exile white missionaries arrived in Umuofia and did change the village. When Okonkwo returned back to his village he saw the major transformations that Umuofia has undergone during his exile. Unhappy with the change, Okonkwo and other villagers together made plan to drive the white missionaries out of their land. Their efforts were gone in vain as the missionaries send their messengers to demolish the meeting. Okonkwo killed one of the messengers and in shock at his actions the villagers let the other messengers vanished from the dangerous grip of Okonkwo. After that the messengers then reported back to the missionaries and they took off to bring Okonkwo to justice only to find him dead.

THE ACTUAL SCENARIO OF THIS NOVEL

The “scramble for Africa” was the primary age of imperialism which was from the 1880s to the 1890s. During this period many European countries did set their colonies in Africa. The Europeans were in quest to grab the glorious Africa's natural resources, and as a result they have arrived into Africa as resulting in their arrival into Africa and as well as they took over the African land. One of the important reasons that the Europeans has been settled their colonial realm into Africa was their claim to civilize the primitive African inhabitants and made them as a proper human beings. The colonizers had the plan to spread their power over the economic, political and social areas of African land. The Europeans were maintained a Eurocentric view as the predominant issue and firmly believed that their culture was the superior than any other's cultures. Eurocentrism and racist tendencies which turned an inferior conditions as the status of the non-whites. In order to prove the good sides of African people and their culture, Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*. First of all Achebe gave concentration towards the language of the Igbo society which was the most important element to Igbo. It usually gave them a sense of belonging and they also used it as a means to preserve and uphold their culture and heritage. As language was the important matter to Igbo, and ultimately this language leads to the fall of their society. In this novel Igbo was the society which was very sceptical about change. They refused to send their children to school where they got the chance to be able to read and write in the English language.

“Despite Mr Brown's efforts to show the villagers that they need to learn English because they are now being ruled by the District Commissioner and other white missionaries who only communicate in English, the villagers still remain reluctant in educating their children” (Achebe 128).

The Igbo actually loved and depend on their own language to make them different from other cultures. They also gave priority on their language to define their social rank in their society. Okonkwo, for instance, when being compared to his father Unoka who was considered as a wealthy man and not only because he has been married a lot of women or his household to produce many yams but because of his strength that helped him defeat one of the strongest wrestlers in the village.

“On the other hand, Unoka was a drunkard who had only one wife, not many yams and had no titles to his name by the time of his death (Achebe 6).

The villagers had named him agbala which was a term Igbo used to refer to women as well as to men who have not taken a title. Consequently this term also applicable for a man who deserved no respect from society because he is not “wealthy”.

Based on the definition of agbala, it is proved that, a man's respect of Igbo society depended by fulfilling either one of the three requirements which has been used to define the social status of a man. Those three essential qualities or requirements of a man was symbolized by having more than one wife, producing many yams (which are determined by the number of wives a man can afford, as women are responsible for crop production) or by defeating the strongest man in the village in a wrestling match, which also determined the number of women he did marry because most of the African families usually wants to settle their daughters marriage to strong wealthy men. In this novel, the Umuofia community was regarded as the community with no knowledge and considered as a secluded society. Here it is to note that the Igbo society

was not at all curious of other forms of life that lied beyond Umuofia. Because they have only known Umuofia to be the only place in the world, and as well as did not show any interest in learning about other places outside of Umuofia. They took their territory as superior and thought that anything outside of their territory was disregarded. Accordingly, for the children of Igbo society, they didn't want them to grab the chance of mobility from Umuofia into the competitive world which the Europeans education assured. They even denied taking the advantages from the white missionaries. That white missionary's main attempt was to teach English to the natives of Umuofia.

Before the white missionary's arrival in Umuofia, the Igbo had their own judicial systems that were based on the knowledge that their forefathers have taught them about their own African culture. Their courts were also operated by the oldest men of the village, whose wisdom and knowledge was trusted in the power of their ancestral Gods to guide them to give fair and unbiased ruling. But the first atrocity of the white missionaries became visible when they tried to replace the Igbo courts with them. It can be said that to replace the courts from Igbo and their territory was one of the big mistakes of white missionaries. The Igbo didn't know what was lawfully right or wrong in the white man's courts and that's why the leaders of the village became surprised when they were imprisoned after burning the missionary church.

The despotic rulers of white missionaries actually was forcing to follow their culture and was destroying the Igbo culture from where they could learn about the better way of leading life. It also raised the question of the common sense of the white missionaries that being a civilized group they ignored to learn the Igbo culture. The Igbo had their own rich culture which was more civilised than the missionaries. To present the good justice than the British courts, the Igbo courts served the actual justice between the two groups in their parties. If two parties were at conflict with each other then both parties has been given the chance to tell their story before a punishment has been taken.

"When the villagers commit any form of crime they are imprisoned without first being questioned whereas Igbo courts question those at conflict before a ruling is taken. For example, Okonkwo beats up his youngest wife during the Week of Peace ". (Achebe 124)

The culture of the Igbo society's men was to beat their wives. Those women have given the chance to take the matter with their own justice before taking to the courts. In this novel Okonkwo was not found guilty for beating his wife. However, Okonkwo's actions showed that Igbo only became violent when the certain situations forced them to be. Therefore, Igbo was a compassionate yet violent society.

"For example, Okonkwo shoots one of the messengers who are sent by the missionaries to break up their meeting". (Achebe 144).

Okonkwo killed one of the white missionaries only because he was tired of their power of authority that they have claimed over their village. Although it is not right thing to be taken by him. And on the other hands, the other people in Okonkwo's group let the other messengers escaped and sat back to watch the missionaries who have taken total control of their territory. The white missionaries who did take refuge in the Igbo land and gave threat to change the cultures of Igbo Society's people.

"It is rather disappointing that Igbo not only welcome the white missionaries to their land but they also easily allocate them a piece of it. The decision by the rulers of Mbanta to allocate land to the missionaries was the worst mistake

the Igbo could make “. (Achebe 105).

This allocation of land to the missionaries created the impression that the Igbo were a weak society and thought that they could easily influence with their culture.

“However, it can also be argued that the decision by the Igbo to keep the piece of land where the evil forest lay is an indication of the respect and loyalty they still have for their own culture (Achebe 105).

As far as the Igbo society was concerned that the white missionaries were aliens because their origin was not known to them. They didn't even understand the concept behind Christianity. Towards the Igbo Christianity means something that has not existed, hence they thought this will ultimately leads to the doom of their culture because they were confused about how to react to this new religion. The white missionaries became convinced that the Igbo society's people were primitives and they did wish to civilize those primitives even though the so called primitives didn't ask for their help or to be civilised. The literary critics such a Edward Said of Orientalism believed them

“ to be cunning in wanting to take control of Igbo land and the lands resources by coming to Umuofia under false pretence of their true intentions which was to rule Umuofia”.

The white missionaries came in Umuofia and almost immediately expected the people of Umuofia to submit themselves towards their authority without having any questions. While in Igbo culture there were some different traditions, for example, it was a common and acceptable practice in Igbo culture that twins should be killed, boys should be sacrificed or dead infants should be mutilated, etc. To the contrary of the root African culture, some villagers were in side of the white missionaries and excited to go along with the white men's idea. Those exceptional villagers thought that it would be the only way to escape from their own religion.

Okonkwo's son Nwoye is among the first converts to Christianity (Achebe 107).

After Okonkwo killed Nwoye's brother and the decision of sacrificing Ikemefuna made Nwoye to protest against his father's act. And he joined the Church and did choose to become a Christian. On the other hands, his father was not at all pleased with Nwoye's decision to join Christianity.

“Although Okonkwo is disappointed in his son's choice he does not act on it. It is then assumed that Okonkwo somehow expected this kind of behaviour from his son as he always saw Nwoye as “weak and woman-like” (Strong-Leek 2).

As Nwoye has converted into Christianity, Okonkwo did disown his son as he considered his son abandoned the Igbo religion. The strong example of Igbo's inability to deal with the change did appear when Okonkwo disowned his son. Okonkwo thought by abandoning his own religion, Nwoye did disrespect his father in every possible way. To show the utmost hate against the white missionaries and the Christian religion, Okonkwo did suicide. By doing like that he not only paid high by losing his life but it also took away the respect that Umuofia once showed for him.

Another character in this novel who also did convert herself to Christianity was a pregnant mother. She was devastated by watching her children on more than one occasion being put to death because they were twins. And according to Igbo tradition, her children had to die, because Igbo religion considered twins which have born for sacrifice. She took this act of Igbo religion as uncommon and the work of the devil. Therefore she converted to Christianity to protect her

unborn child or children. Along with Nwoye and the pregnant mother, many of the villagers became passionate followers of Christianity because in

“God’s eyes (though in not in the eyes of the missionaries) they are equals to everyone else” (Akers-Rhoads 69).

Some of the people in Igbo society thought by accepting the Christian religion they could remove their sufferings but they had no idea that by doing like that they were welcoming more sufferings as they had incurred from their own religion and culture. Achebe did portray the attributes of the European colonialism through the white missionaries who did challenge the Igbo culture. Achebe exhibited the negative sides of the white missionaries by portraying the pictures of forcing Igbo people to abandon their own way of life to follow theirs. It seemed to be the only factor that made the white missionaries as the despotic rulers in history.

THE WRONG APPROACHES OF WHITE MISSIONARIES TOWARDS THE IGBO SOCIETY

I would say the white missionaries took the wrong approaches in their attempts to help and civilize Igbo society. Mr. Brown was the most sensible person among the white missionary’s other people. He came to Umuofia at first with the hope to civilize the villagers and also he wanted to convert most of the villagers to Christianity if not all. Soon Mr. Brown realized that he could learn something from Igbo which the other members of the white missionaries didn’t realize.

“Whenever Mr. Brown went to Umuofia, he spent long hours with Akunna in his obi talking about religion through an interpreter. However, neither of them succeeded in winning the other to their belief, but they did learn more about their dissimilar faiths” (Achebe 126).

The white missionary’s arrival in Umuofia was unexpected and they thought that because they were more civilised and educated they should be the ones to rule in Umuofia. By doing so they immediately belittled the status and importance of Igbo in their own land. This is a great disrespect to Igbo and their ancestors. It would have been pleasant if the missionaries consider the Igbo people at the same high standard they thought they were at.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it can be said that *Things Fall Apart* has been written to explore the ruling attitudes of the European colonisers in the form of white missionaries and as well as the imperfections of Igbo culture as well and their strengths. Although Achebe presented the fall of the Igbo which was caused by their inability and aversion to learn English because they believed that they will never have to apply its usage in their everyday lives. On the other sides, the missionaries considered themselves as stronger than the Igbo due to their advancement in the era of modern life and education. They were possessed the stronger influence as well as controlling power of Igbo land and the Igbo themselves. Achebe mainly showed the missionaries hostile approach to take over the ruling powers of Igbo land from its natives by using their influence to spread their gospel and at the same time demolishing Igbo’s traditional customs and beliefs. According to Achebe the missionaries were particularly superior to Igbo. When the white missionaries saw Igbo as uncivilized and uneducated then they felt importance to make them civilized. Moreover, the intentions of the arrival of missionaries in Umuofia were to rule over its people, and as well as did find the way of a cultural exchange between the two.

Perhaps the exchange between the two cultures would bring some benefits to the Igbo people but they were not

interested to know the world outside of Umuofia. The author of this novel wanted to show the unique cultural systems of African land like Nigeria, where Umuofia was a fictional village. While in the Europeans part, they thought themselves as superior compared to Igbo. By the superior traits the white men saw Igbo as a burden and didn't feel privileged to educate them of things they did not know. The clash between two cultures happened when the white missionary's people believed that their culture was morally superior to Igbo culture and this caused a conflict between the two cultures. Eventually it was to be noted that there were the importance and benefits of both the cultures which we need to acknowledge. And also the challenges of European colonialism about their superiority to Igbo society took the central part of this novel *Things Fall Apart*. The Europeans also taught Igbo about their English culture. But the Igbo considered it as difficult to transition from their own native African culture which they learnt something new from it. Nonetheless, there was the presence of challenges that faced by Igbo as a consequence of the arrival of the white missionaries. For the arrival of the white missionaries and their culture the Igbo society has lost something important from their own ideologies of being a Igbo people. By the influence of white missionaries the Igbo people lost most of the values that tied them together as one. The coherence between the individual and society was lost, the values and way of life was lost. This all has been happened because of the confused state of mind of Igbo. They were in confusion whether to reject or embrace the changes made by the white missionaries. The people of Umuofia accepted the arrival of white missionaries on their land and also they gave them a piece of their land, but they didn't know that these men of white missionaries will ruin their culture completely. Achebe tried to present this devastated situation of Igbo land and also the sufferings of Igbo people caused by the white missionaries.

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