

SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart' is a postcolonial novel that illustrates the life of Okonkwo, a local leader in one of Nigerian villages, Umuofia. Umuofian is known for powerful clan, skilled in war and with great reputation for proud traditions and advanced social institutions. Achebe has distinctly portrayed the problems of social disintegration through different disharmonies at the nine villages in Nigeria. Okonkwo takes an intellectual decision when the problem arises from the neighbour village man but the sin he committed against an innocent boy lead him to downhill. Okonkwo worries about the bleak future of his clansmen. He fights against the fabrication of the white men and wants to save his community and culture from the onslaught of the foreign culture and Christian religion. The role of disintegration plays at all level even in Okonkwo's family. This novel deals with the life of Igbo people and the British colonization in Umuofia and Achebe portrays that the white men have an established religion with a holy book called the Bible to show as concrete evidence, whereas the Igbo religion has only an oral tradition. The Oracle is their only authority to abide by. Achebe's image of Africa becomes a challenging subject to the Western literary world.

Keywords: Society, Clans, White men, Igbo and Christianity

Chinua Achebe is one of the prominent personalities in African literature and his *Things Fall Apart* is a postcolonial novel that portrays the life of Okonkwo, a rich local leader and warrior of the nine Nigerian villages. Umuofia is one among the nine where Okonkwo leads his life as a clansman. The novel is divided into three parts; the first two depicts the life of Igbo people and the third is about the British colonization in Umuofia. Most part of the story resembles the period of 1890s in Nigerian villages, located at the west of Onitsha in the East bank of the Niger River, Nigeria. Umuofian is known for powerful clan, skilled in war and with great reputation for proud traditions and advanced social institutions. The title, *Things Fall Apart* taken from W.B. Yeats's *The Second Coming*, speaks of social disintegration falling apart basic social fabric that happened to the African tribal societies intact. It is a study of cross-cultural and the tragic consequences which destroys the rest of the humanity after the invasion of Western influence. When a belligerent culture or civilization becomes unleashed any other culture can easily penetrate into the society and act as the global custodian of culture. Then invariable things begin to fall apart and total disintegration stares at the defeated community and its culture.

Achebe has distinctly portrayed the social disintegration through different disharmonies at the nine villages in Nigeria. In this domain, Okonkwo has attained a high position in clan through his hard work. When a man from the neighbouring place killed a woman in Umuofia, Okonkwo demands a boy of the man who killed the woman. Okonkwo takes the boy named Ikemefuna to his village for the sake of peaceful settlement among the villagers. The boy certainly lives in the village for three years under Okonkwo's roof, becomes a member of Okonkwo's family, Nwoye, son of Okonkwo has affectionate relationship with Ikemefuna loves him as his elder brother. Unfortunately Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected man in the same

domain advises Okonkwo secretly that he has received the voice of the Oracle to kill the boy for heaven sake. A group of men from the village take the boy away to kill him in forest. Okonkwo participates in the killing and, in fact, delivers the final deadly blow on the boy so as to avoid others to think of him as soft-hearted one. Okonkwo is deeply upset over the killing of Ikemefuna. Moreover Okonkwo's eldest son, Nwoye is terribly angry with his father over the killing of Ikemefuna. Adegbite O argues that, "The beliefs of Okonkwo on the handling and treatment of issues termed feminine are not a cultural belief, but personal as other successful and prosperous men are observed not to share in his handling of some societal issues" (82).

The first half of the novel is illustrated with the disintegration of characters through the sins committed. After the committing the sin against the innocent boy, Ogbuefi Ezeudu is the man who urged Okonkwo to kill the boy is also died which make him feel disgust about his personal deeds. During the funeral of Ogbuefi Ezeudu, Okonkwo's gun explodes unexpectedly, kills a boy. In accordance with Umuofian law, Okonkwo and his family are proclaimed to exile for seven years. He goes to his motherland, Mbanta. The life of Okonkwo leads to downhill around the time of the white men arrive to Umuofia and they want to evangelize the Nigerian tribes. The Igbo tribal men are naive enough to allow them get settled in their place. The white settlers are permitted to build church in the Evil forest, far remove from the clan. The white men skillfully focus the outcast people of Nigerian villages to convert them to Christianity. Osu, lower division of tribes become the first victim to the white colonization through the religion conversion. Mr. Brown is a man who attracts the tribes by his magnetic words and offering the young tribes new opportunities and techniques to lead a sophisticated life.

After the invasion of the white men, the disintegration is increased in mass level of population in the villages. In course of time, the white men slowly penetrate into the tribal society and the clan is split into different groups as supporting and opposing the white men. Okonkwo's family is also divided, his son Nwoye is converted to Christianity and the new converts strongly believe that their conversions are for change, growth and development. Even though the Igbo tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, its future eventually becomes bleak. The tradition of the clan is corrupted because of the invasion of European culture and the belief of Christianity. Abiola Irele suitably states about the cultural clash portrayed by Achebe in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*

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. (10)

After seven years, Okonkwo returns to his tribal village and he is afraid of that the European inspiration threatens to extinguish the need for mastery of the traditional methods of farming, harvesting, building and cooking. When the traditional methods become crucial for survival, the new way of life is brought by the missionaries. The things become worsen after the death of Mr. Brown. Rev. Smith, who takes over the affairs after Mr. Brown, is a proud preacher who believes Christianity is the only religion. In addition to eradicating the traditional belief of the tribal people, the white has also taken over the justice system.

Overenthusiastic newly converted Christians commit some grave disrespect to the Igbo clan by unveiling a holy spirit. The enraged clan burns down the church in the Evil forest. The clan leaders are announced to arrive in one place for a peace meeting by the white men but they are arrested and put them in jail. Okonkwo and the other clan leaders are beaten up, brutally tortured and insulted in the jail and they are released only after paying a heavy fine. In the ensuing meeting of the clan to discuss the course of action for peaceful life, two court messengers appear suddenly and ask the clansmen to peacefully disperse from the place. Enraged Okonkwo kills one of the messengers but the other one is let off by the clansmen.

Okonkwo worries about the bleak future of his clansmen. He fights against the fabrication of the white men and wants to save his community and culture from the onslaught of the white settler's foreign culture and Christian religion. The role of disintegration plays at all level and almost in all families in the village. Even in Okonkwo's family, most of the youth support the changes and civilized life promised by the Christian missionaries. Okonkwo's call for an outright war against the white settlers falls on deaf ears. Okonkwo is terribly upset. He cannot fight alone and his tribesmen not support him to precede war against the white men. Okonkwo believes that there is an only way to keep the sacredness and proud of his brave and masculinity which is committing suicide. This pathetic and personal grievance stands as a tragic symbol of his society's imminent disintegration. Even though the committing suicide is restricted and sin of Igbo culture, Okonkwo kills himself.

The image of the African native community and culture is presented in *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe is an image of a coherent social structure, a living entity and forming the fabricated meanings and values in the universe. This bold and keen illustration of the earlier period of African life is quite new to the world. The other foreign writers have given the image of Africa only by their own vision but Achebe is entirely literal in the theme of subject matter he has dealt with. Achebe portrays the story of the novel about the life of distinct community people and their social disintegration they faced actually with internal pressures by the invasion of Western colonization. This image of Africa becomes a challenging subject to the Western literary world.

The white men are self-proud, cunning and aggressive and they have a plan to evangelize the tribes, whereas the tribesmen are humble naive. The white men have an established religion with a holy book called the Bible to show as concrete evidence, whereas the Igbo religion has only an oral tradition. The Oracle is their only authority to abide by. The white men submerge and dismantle all native institutions in their places, put them in an authoritarian foreign rule. Achebe explores that the whole of the cultural encounter, conflict and the final disintegration of the tribe:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peacefully with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan no longer acts like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (TFA, 176)

It is a clear misconception that the African culture is savage and primitive. It is a serious mistake to expect every other culture to develop and grow on the Western model. This may lead to a foolish idea of unknown fabricated world as one religion, one culture, and one language. This is not only a stupid thing but also gravely dangerous. The African culture never needs a redeemer like the white man. Already a well-evolved democratic community and native culture, it has its own Igbo religion, an efficient government by pioneers, a system of money and an artistic tradition as well as judicial systems. It would have been allowed to make its own decision, left absolutely untouched and undisturbed, so that it could evolve, grow and change on its own, according to the modern needs.

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