

EXPLORING 'PATRIOTISM' IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*

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Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) portrays the issues of patriotism and reflects the political and social conditions of Nigeria. The novelist reveals that period of Nigeria, when colonialism and Christianity was in direct attack. The novel is set during the late 1800s or beginning of the 1900s in a small village called Umofia situated in the south-eastern part of Nigeria. The time period indicated in the novel is important because it was a period in colonial history when British were expanding their influence in Africa, right before the arrival of white man economically, culturally and politically. Umofia is an Igbo village with very well-defined traditions. This well-defined traditional Igbo village is torn apart by the coming of the white man. The whole novel centers round Umofia where Achebe presents different aspects of patriotism and nationhood like 'good patriotism', 'bad patriotism', 'pitfalls of national consciousness and many other things.

In Africa, patriotism emerged as a kind of reaction to colonialism. Achebe was for patriotism as he believed that it could protect one's cultural heritage. He was against colonialism and its attendant exploitation and despised the invitation to throw away one's own identity in exchange for an alien one. This attitude can be perceived in the character of Okonkwo in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*. He is portrayed as a strong reaction against British colonialism. His patriotic zeal can be seen when he attempted to rebuild Umofia from the clutches of the British imperialism. This can be perceived in Chapter Twenty of the novel, *Things Fall Apart* when Okonkwo returns to his native village, Umofia after seven years of exile. Okonkwo knew that British imperialism was creeping into his village and his seven years of absence, has made him lose his position in the village. His sense of patriotism towards his village can be seen through his concern over the emerging loss of traditional culture and values. When he returned to his village after seven years of exile he was terribly disappointed and disturbed. His patriotic zeal or extreme possessiveness for Umofia can be seen when he abandoned his own son at the cost of his dear village, Umofia. Okonkwo's return is not as memorable as he had expected, because too many things have happened and too many changes have taken place in his village. He deeply mourned the drastic change in his village:

Okonkwo was deeply grieved. And it was not just a personal grief. He mourned for the warlike men of Umofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women. (2001:133)

Patriotism is a problematic and debatable issue. It is a problematic issue because of the divisions within the nation. In the novel, *Things Fall Apart* divisions within the nation can be seen. People of the same nation are divided among themselves. Most of the natives in Umofia with the arrival of British or the whites have converted themselves to Christians. They come under the clutches of British rule and gradually began to eliminate their own culture and traditions. One such good example is how Okonkwo's son Nwoye who had converted himself as a Christian. In the Sixteenth Chapter of the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Nwoye has been portrayed as coming under the direct influence of British imperialism:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow.... (2001: 108)

It can also be seen that Okonkwo's son had changed his name from Nwoye to Issac. This is not the only

case with Nwoye. Most of the people in the village under the direct influence of British imperialism came to lose their culture. It was people like Okonkwo and Obierika who felt aggrieved with the fall down of their culture. It is the patriotic sentiment that ignites Okonkwo because of the violation of the principles of his Igbo culture and traditions. However this is just one view and a one-sided definition of nationalism. Totally relying on this definition, Okonkwo cannot be called as a true patriotic figure. It is true that he tries to save his culture and his Umofia at any cost but as against this, he is also responsible to some extent for Nwoye's conversion to a Christian. It cannot totally be said that Nwoye was influenced to join the church only because of religion, but it was because of his father Okonkwo that he joined the church. Throughout the novel Okonkwo is portrayed as an ambitious man, which was because he refused to acknowledge the idle life of his own father Unoka. This then prompts Okonkwo to instigate his son, Nwoye not to become a lazy fellow. When he finds that Nwoye is becoming as lazy as his own father Unoka, he begins to disrespect and abuse Nwoye who ultimately finds an alternative, by joining the church. After joining the church, Nwoye found Mr. Kiaga, a missionary, to be his new "father":

"Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother." Nwoye did not fully understand. But he was happy to leave his father. (2001:112)

It can be said up to some point that Okonkwo and Nwoye have similar qualities as well as differences. Both are dissimilar because of their work---one prefers hard work, whereas other prefers not to work. Again on the other hand, Okonkwo's fate of disgrace in committing suicide is just the opposite of Nwoye's joining the Christian church, which implies the search for grace. Both men's actions are against the traditions of their village. In this connection, pitfalls of national consciousness can be seen, where violation of "patriotic principle" is generated.

According to Gellner, violation of nationalistic principle gives rise to patriotic sentiment. This is true in the sense that it is the passivity of the dwellers of Umofia which allowed the Christian missionaries to take possession of their village. Things fell apart because Umofia took a passive stance by allowing the religion to stay. The conversion of Igbo people to Christianity seems to indicate that there is a representative attitude of doubt and discontentment within Umofia (and later indicated to be similar in Mbanta). Customs such as throwing away twins and human sacrifice were troubling and no justification could be found within their own religious doctrine. The timeliness of Christianity allowed it to spread because it was the only available way through which they could get their unsettled answer. There were many questions, to which there were no answers in the minds of the Igbo people. The villagers need answers to explain the uncertainties they were feeling and Christianity was the only possible option. This attitude is again characterized by Nwoye while he is in Mbanta:

It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. ... The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul---the question of twins lying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed. He felt a relief within as the hymn poured into his parched soul. (2001: 108)

The missionaries also gained respect and power by flourishing in circumstances that were believed to bring certain death, as prescribed by Igbo spirituality. But the people of Mbanta were overwhelmed by the missionary's victory over death:

The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. The first day passed, and the fourth and none of them died. Everyone was puzzled.....it became known that the white man's fetish had unbelievable power. (2001: 110)

Christianity began to flourish only because of the passivity of the people of Umofia. The people of Umofia were driven away by the British church. Christianity provided an answer to the questions that the

people of Umofia were feeling about their spirituality: the Igbo religion appeared to be false by default and this **was** how Igbo spirituality fell apart.

Although patriotism is an unchanging entity, it is a social construct that is constantly redefined and historically contingent. Patriotism is a shifting kind of entity, meaning that there is not a single definition for patriotism. It varies from person to person and from place to place. In fact the concept of nation along with patriotism is a myth. That is why in the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, perception of one's own nation varies with person to person. In the novel, it can be seen that with the intrusion of British imperialism, different visions of patriotism comes to the forefront especially the cultural clashes among its own people. In this novel, the people of Umofia outcasts their own village people, that is, the "osu" (the untouchables), "thetwins" and especially 'the mother of the twins'. Here in this point, loopholes of patriotism can be seen. It is only because of the negligence of its own people that the members of the same community fall and are torn apart. The "osu" are the first ones to convert themselves with the intrusion of British imperialism. They have been harshly judged by the society, ultimately prompting them to convert themselves to Christians. The own native people regarded the "osu" as:

a thing set aparta taboo forever, and his children after him. He could neither marry nor be married by the free-born. He was in fact an outcast living in a special area of the village, close to the Great Shrine. Wherever he went he carried with him the mark of his forbidden caste...An osu could not attend an assembly of the free-born...when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest... (2001:115-116)

They suffered emotional trauma and this has been reduced by the British imperialism. Twins who were normally killed are saved by the missionaries and brought up like regular children. These are some of the loopholes within the village which generates different perspectives of patriotism, pointing at weakness of the spirit of patriotism. The villagers are considered as outcasts, they believed that constructing their own village according to that of the views of Christians would be a better option. This can be proved by bringing forth the arguments of Fanon and Edward Said. According to them colonized subject is never simply and completely opposed to the colonizer. The defect that lies here is that the member of one's own community feels alien within its own nation only because of its own fellow members.

Considering the issues of patriotism in *Things Fall Apart*, the experience of women within the patriotic discourse can also be discussed. The novel represents gender relations as an integral part of Achebe's discourse on nationalism. Women play important roles in the regulation of law and order and in dispensation of justice within an Igbo community before the colonial rule. Evidences are there during the "uri", bridal ceremony that is performed for Obierika's daughter. At this point in the narrative when the women discover that one of Ezelagbo's "young children" had "opened the gate of the cow-shed". (2001: 84) and let loose a cow, they act to ensure law and order:

When they [the women] saw it they drove it back to its owner, who at once paid the heavy fine which the village imposed on anyone whose cow was let loose on his neighbour's crops. When the women had exacted the penalty they checked to see if any woman had failed to come out when the alarm was raised. (1958:10-11)

This incident presents a crystal clear picture of the institutions of justice in traditional Igbo society. Such acts of women in pre-colonial Nigerian society are emblematic of the power inherent in the dual-sex structure of Igbo societies, which allowed women to intervene and dispense justice through the act of sitting on a man. Another example of the function of women's traditional associations is provided in *Things Fall Apart* when Amikwu, "The youngest of Uchendu's five sons" (2001:96), marries a new wife. At the "full gathering ofumuada" (2001:97), celebrating Amikwu's marriage, Njide, Uchendu's eldest daughter leads the ceremony of absolution.

Critics who have placed the images of women in *Things Fall Apart* in an antithetical relationship to Achebe's patriotic project have missed the point. Instead, the novel offers a glimpse into social

organization and regulation of law and order in the Igbo past and the role that women played in these processes. Critics of gender politics of Achebe's novels have argued that his novels foreshadow the power of women to play important national roles after Nigeria attained independence. Diana Rhoads has observed that in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe seems

to be providing the foundation for effective political institutions at the same time when Nigeria was about to achieve independence... such institutions as combining both feminine and masculine principles. (1993:71)

It becomes easier to comprehend the reasons why Achebe consistently draws upon the identity of women in the past to affirm a belief that women in the post-independent Nigerian nation can play roles similar to those of the past. Instead of focusing solely on the conflicts occasioned by colonialism, the domestic conflicts in which women are embroiled become central to the narration of the complex nature of Igbo societies. An example of this kind can be seen with that of the exchange takes place in *Things Fall Apart* between Okonkwo and his "senior wife" when young Ikemefuna is first brought to the Umofia clan and put under the tutelage of Okonkwo:

'He belongs to the clan' he told her. 'So look after him.' 'Is he staying long with us?' she asked. 'Do what you are told, woman,' Okonkwo thundered, and stammered. 'When did you become one of the ndichie of Umofia?' And so Nwoye's mother took Ikemefuna to her hut and asked no more questions. (2001: 12)

Okonkwo's manner would seem to prove that his wives and the women in the community are voiceless. However, Nwoye's mother eventually subverts Okonkwo's presumed authority over her and reduces him to a powerless figure within the clan. By locating the struggle for voice, authority and power between men and women within a local context, Achebe is able to convey to his readers the belief that conflicts in Igboland predated colonialism. He projects the evidence of women's struggles for power in the contest for authority with men, and questions the dominant assumption that the struggle for power can only be articulated at the public political level of the conflicts initiated by colonialism.

Many of Achebe's novels deal with the social and political problems that needle his country, inclusive of the difficulties of post-colonial legacy. *Things Fall Apart* was his first novel. It presents the story of a people torn apart by the invasion of colonial rulers. *Things Fall Apart* represent a pre-colonial Igbo culture struggling against all odds to retain its integrity against the loss of autonomy and through the novel Achebe has made his stamp as one of the most influential and widely acclaimed writers of Africa.

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