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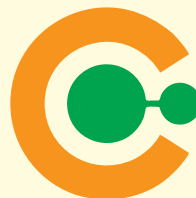
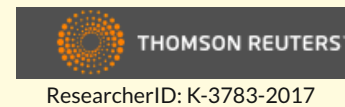
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Post Colonial Awareness in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

Post colonial awareness refers to the representation of race, culture, ethnicity, and identity crisis in the modern era of globalization and Chinua Achebe's fiction demonstrates his use of English language not only as a communicative device, but also as a vehicle to carry the weight of a cultural experience. It is an embodiment of the Nigerian civilization and therefore dramatizes modes of perception within its cultural grouping. The present paper explores the post-colonial awareness of the African people and culture in the context of colonization.

Keywords: *ethnicity, identity crisis, , civilization, racial discrimination.*

FULL PAPER

The Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is appropriate to the novel's record of the destruction of the civilization in the recalling Yeats' theory of the cyclical pattern of history completely ignoring African cultural history. Ironically enough, Yeats' poem, '*The Second Coming*' foresees the end of a Christian era, whereas Achebe's novel records the end of a non-Christian era in the Eastern Nigeria. It presents a view of pre-colonial imaginary village of Umuofia set in Eastern Nigeria towards the end of the nineteenth century. The book presents a picture of a well ordered, traditional and culturally coherent world which operates according to a set of values that hold the society together. This sympathetic and nostalgic portrayal of the past was Achebe's "act of atonement, the ritual return and homage of a prodigal society. The evocation of the past is Achebe's way of reviving self-respect among his countrymen just like the second coming of W. B. Yeats. Hence, one can say that his task was of enlightening his African readers and to "help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the year of denigration and self-abasement" (HAI, 44). Achebe is of the view "what I write is applied art as distinct from pure art..." (HAI, 45). It can be taken as Achebe's major intention behind his writings. His novels can be read as a protest against the western concept of setting up Africa as a foil to Europe, in the place of negations as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality" (HAI, 43).

Through his portrayal of African culture and civilization in his novels, Achebe attempts to convey his readers that "their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all they had dignity" (Killiam, 8). The present novel was written in response to a series of provocations and impetuses by the superficial image of Africa, projected in European fiction such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), but more specifically, it was Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* that made him compel to recreate his Africa at writing which stirred him to project the history and the theology of his people through his novels. This stung him into trying to take a look into Africa from the inside. With the reference of Yeats' concept of vast historic cycle, and challenging Cary's fictional ideas, Achebe challenges a whole vision of history, culture, values and practices of society and literature.

Achebe is of the view that the African past was perfect and there was no need of detesting this country and culture in the credibility of the world suspecting of glossing over inconvenient facts. He points out that while he upholds the beauty, dignity, and the philosophy of the past, he does not glorify or idealize his nation but he admits that "like other people's past ours had its good as well as its bad sides" (Killiam, 9). Achebe observes that the writers should help his people in regaining their dignity: "By showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost... [and] to explore in depth the human condition. In Africa he cannot perform this task

unless he has a proper sense of history” (Killiam, 9). This consideration of the novelist brings us to consider the enigmatic difference between reality and fiction, and the position of a writer in relation to presenting the historical and cultural changes in his novels. He does not assume the role of a historian but that of a cultural nationalist when he employs his fictions as a record of the past African history and society because he thinks: “Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him, an aspiration to provide him with a second handle on existence through his imagination” (HAI, 139).

In this regard, one of the most important things about the novel is the manner in which it demonstrates that intricate relationship between a man's individual psychology and the social context in which he has grown up will enable us to explore some of the major things such as the relationship between individual and history, between knowledge and self-assumption, between individual fulfillment and social responsibility, between creativity and sterility and so forth. The readers can mind on that the Igbo way of life presenting in the novel is totally different from the fabric portrayal of the African society in the European writers and writings. So, Achebe cautions about approaching African literature with any preconceived notion or prejudices in the opinions of the European critics who cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to their limited experiences of the African world. Achebe states that what has been observed in the works of the European writers and critics may be applied to the ill-equipped knowledge of the African culture and society.

One of the major studies of Igbo society is the insightful book of missionary and anthropologist G.T. Basden who gives a detailed account of the primitive life, customs and animistic beliefs of the Igbo people of Nigeria. He also gives us valuable information on some of the major characteristics of the Igbo world: “In the Igbo country, lying on the left bank of the Niger, society is largely based on patriarchal lines... where Polygamy is intimately bound up with the lives of the Igbo people” (Basden, 228). In his opinion, “A man who 'is able to multiply his wives rises automatically in the social scale” (Basden, 228) of Igbo world. Though, every clan and family is an independent unit yet the communal life, within limits, is a potent factor in the life of the people. Having no king and kinship in the Igbo society, the elders of the tribes are the administrators of the general affairs of the community, “pride is one of the outstanding features of the Igbos... expressed in their striving for titular rank and their arrogance when they have attained it” (Basden, 130). The controlling factors of the society in obtaining their dignity are their birth right and money process. The staple food of the Igbos is yam, and its cultivation was the most serious occupation of the native. Among other food habits, an Igbo eats the flesh of almost every creature except the prohibited meat of the animals by taboo. A particular dainty to the Igbos is the locust. The only universally omitted item from the pagan Igbo's menu is the sacred python. The favourite drink of Igbos is palm wine. Such description of Igbo life prepares us for the knowledge of Igbo society in the imaginary but highly representative village of Umuofia at the turn of the century in *Things Fall Apart*.

The narrator extols the virtues of the protagonist, Okonkwo, approving him for having brought honour to his village by overthrowing a well-known wrestler in a match which was affirmed by the respected authority of the 'elders' to have been one of the fiercest. A little later, the narrator lists the set of achievements of Okonkwo which make him a distinguished member of his society where "a man was judged according to his worth" (TFA, 11). Okonkwo had achieved these commendable distinctions as "the greatest wrestler in the nine villages... a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams [a] sign of extra-ordinary industry and wealth), and had just married his third wife [a symbol of social prominence]" (TFA, 11-12). In this way, at the very young age Okonkwo had become one of the greatest men of his time in a society where: "Age was respected... but achievement was revered" (TFA, 12). The success of Okonkwo can be measured in terms of the things he has the rare distinction of being a symbol of success in a village which is - feared by all its neighbours: "It was powerful in war and in magic, and its priests and medicine men were feared in all the surrounding country" (TFA, 15). In such a prominent village, Okonkwo felt the honour of being chosen as "the proud and imperious emissary of war" (TFA, 16). The important feature of the clan underlined by the narrator can be seen here: "in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle" (TFA, 16). In this way, the author through the narrator makes an important distinction between Okonkwo's differing attitudes and his society which causes his tragic fall.

There is an element of rigidity and a disregard for the oppressed human beings in this novel. The circumstantial considerations in Igbo society that are confronted to Okonkwo completely or to put it differently, some of the characteristic shortcomings of Okonkwo are also shared by his clan as a whole. In spite of relative individual exceptions and many evident values of Igbo traditional society, Umuofia reveals a few traits of inflexibility and moral indifference in some of its customs. The analytical study of the novel tells its readers that Okonkwo is not an archetype of Igbo society. He is looking as a product of a combination of social moulding and family circumstance where the latter has an equally strong impact on his personality as the farmer. Such significant revelation by the narrator rules out the possibility of social forces being stronger than personal factors in the life of Okonkwo clearly. The fear of resembling his father is shown to be greater than the fears shared by his society: "Okonkwo was ruled by one passion - to hate everything that his father, Unoka, had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness" (TFA, 17).

Further, the careful reading of the novel betrays that the only ambition in Okonkwo's life is to be as different as possible from his father as Unoka was 'lazy and improvident' while Okonkwo "had begun even in his father's life time to lay the foundations of a prosperous future" (TFA, 11). Unoka was never happy when it came to wars while Okonkwo was a man of action, a man of war. It shows that the update society is looking more powerful than that of the old in Igbo. Unoka was poor and "his wife and his children had barely enough to eat" (TFA, 11) in contrast Okonkwo's prosperity was visible in his household (TFA, 17). The novel also discloses the fact

that Unoka loved music and the plaintive tune of his flute suggesting 'sorrow and grief.' Unlike Unoka, Okonkwo has very little to do with music. He even objects to the musical elements in folk tales told by the women of his house to Nwoye. Owing to these fears that possess and torment him, Okonkwo channelizes all his energy into becoming a respectable member of his society.

This fear makes Okonkwo evolve his own definitions of strength and manliness, "To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength" (TFA, 30). It is pathetic to see that in his attempt to demonstrate strength, he represses every emotion and feeling. Conforming to this crooked definition of manliness, he is unable to permit himself for the luxury of self-expression and enjoyment. He is driven to prove a point to himself and his society and his doings disturb the balance between the masculine and the feminine principles, so central to the Igbo way of life. It is this attitude that throws his relationship with some of the members of his society. The unstated Igbo definition of greatness is the union of the masculine and feminine principles that Okonkwo is unable to comprehend. This sense of balance of these opposing principles can be understood in the episode where one can learn about the death of Ndulue and his wife Ozoemena which can also be discussed in detail. Having the burden of the responsibility of fending for his father's house at an early age, Okonkwo never gets an opportunity to relax and enjoy with work and action so completely that he becomes incapable of happiness and enjoyment.

The narrator modulates our responses to Okonkwo by disclosing his inward reactions to us when Okonkwo violates the Sacred Week of Peace by beating up his wife, one is told clearly that 'inwardly he was repentant' but outwardly he was brutish. However, the course of owning his mistake is not open to him according to his own peculiar code of behaviour. Similarly, when he would nag and find fault with the efforts of Nwoye and Ikemefuna at the farm "Inwardly Okonkwo knew that the boys were still too young to understand fully the art of preparing seed yams" (TFA, 34). Okonkwo like a colonized man is unfortunately terribly lacking in self-expression, and pathetically misguided in his notions of equating gentleness and weakness. This denial of the feminine principle of love and tenderness points out to the void in his life and his personality. It is also seen as one of the reasons for the total severing of relationship with his son Nwoye who was expected, "to be a prosperous man, having enough in his barn to feed the ancestors with regular sacrifices" (TFA, 34).

The association between Okonkwo's aversion to gaiety and its obvious reference to his father is made clear in the episodes, following the celebrations of the Yam festival. Okonkwo who had been walking around aimlessly in his compound in suppressed anger, suddenly found an outlet which led to an unreasonable bout of wife beating on the pretext that she had killed a banana tree, which was "very much alive" (TFA, 39) emphasizing the importance of vegetations in the life of commonality. It is noticeable that after this violent episode, Okonkwo wishes to go and involve himself with blood and killing: "in fact he had not killed a rat with his gun" (TFA, 39). All these gestures have their root in Okonkwo's attempt to show himself different from

his father, whose miserable life he abhorred, and fears lest he should be likened to him.

The central episode of the novel is one where Ikemefuna is sacrificed as per the pronouncement of the Oracles of the Hill and Caves. The readers are told that Okonkwo chooses to go with the group of men who were to execute Ikemefuna. As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his machete, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow of Ikemefuna crying, "My father, they have killed me! as he ran towards him, dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (TFA, 59). This heinous action of Okonkwo shows him brutal against the colonized rules. One of the things that disenchanted Nwoye about his own traditions and practices was killing of Ikemefuna, "Something seems to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow" (TFA, 59). Among the Igbos, the twins were considered evil, and it was incumbent that they should be destroyed without delay. Sociologists maintain that this aversion to twins might be rooted in the belief that it is contrary to human nature to multiply in twos, that there must be a difference between human species and brute creation. Among the Yoruba people, twins are respected and treasured and credited with extra human powers.

Returning to our discussion of Okonkwo, in one of his rare private moments, we find Okonkwo as bundle of nerves, shuddering with fear and sorrow at the thought of Ikemefuna. The fact however, remains that killing Ikemefuna was not the same as his valorous performance in war. Okonkwo's tragedy is that he identifies everything so strongly with the social code of bravery, manliness and strength that he does not permit himself even the private moments of grievances. This is where Okonkwo goes beyond the concept of manliness and greatness held by his society. Obierika exclaims at Okonkwo's participation in Ikemefuna's execution stands in between that of Okonkwo's relentless pursuit for becoming a symbol of manliness and success and Nwoye's rejection of it. Okonkwo prefers himself to be a man of action, rather than a test of manliness.

This does not, however, imply a complete inability to achieve the balance of the opposing powers of masculine and female principles. The union in life and death of Ndulue and Ozoemena is symbolic dramatization of the union of the masculine and feminine attributes essential in a great man. Ndulue was a great warrior and great man because he was able to find that balance of love and sensitivity in the fulfilling relationship with his wife. For Okonkwo the conflict between private self and the public man is the conflict between feminine and masculine principles. His inability to comprehend the fact that the feminine attributes are necessary for greatness is revealed in naive comments on the deaths of Ndulue and Ozoemena. This episode is author's way of spelling out the difference between the attitudes of Okonkwo as different from those of his clansmen.

Tragically, there is tremendous potential in Okonkwo who is not incapable of feeling emotions but of their expression and indulgence. For instance, there is nothing as touching in the whole novel as Okonkwo's concern for his ailing daughter. His deep attachment to Ezinma is revealed in the speed with which he springs towards

Ekwefi's hut to look after Ezinma, in his putting together of the medicinal concoction and in his efforts to bring down the temperature. Another significant positive potential for emotional relationship is expressed in the relationship between Okonkwo and his wife Ekwefi. Okonkwo's suicide is perhaps his ultimate protest against the invaders of his world. He can exist no longer, because the rules, the rituals, the ceremonies and the values that shaped his mind and soul are in a state of collapse. It is ironical that despite a lifelong effort to erase the ignominy of his father's life, death equalizes them - they both die as abominations, offenders of the earth goddess, deprived of a decent burial by their clansmen.

The colonial missionaries penetrate the village of Umuofia in Okonkwo's absence. When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia he finds its traditional and fearful status eroded due to the encroachment of the white civilization. He discovers to his dismay that the faith won many converts and some of them were not *osus* (outcasts) or *efulfuls* (worthless people) but men of high rank and title too. The new faith was thus not only consuming what Agbala called 'the excrement of the clan' but also some of its worthy men. In a pattern typical to colonial powers, the alien force not only introduces a new religion but also a new government. The traditional values of Umuofia began to feel the impact of the colonial encounter at an early stage. The authority of the Oracles and the *Egwugwu*s as judges began to be replaced by the white man's court. Christianity was introduced in Igbo not as an alternate choice of religion but the only course which attacked the cohesiveness of the Igbo society by weakening the forces that hold it together. This process of colonization and impact is hinted by Obierika: "The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at 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" (TFA, 162).

As always in Okonkwo's life, it is the twin forces of society and personal pressure incumbent on him that result in his taking his own life. The historical forces, acting through society, destroy Okonkwo's plane of existence i.e. the Igbo society, and in doing so, destroy him too. At a personal level, Okonkwo dies as he lived - in fear. Okonkwo is afraid of the incomprehensibility of his society, of his aloneness of his stand, afraid of acknowledging his inability of defending his tribe. In life as in death, Okonkwo was locked in a struggle with fear: a fear of having to witness a complete the uprooting of his culture; a fear of humiliation by the white man; a fear of being helpless to fight forces beyond his control.

To sum up one can say that Chinua Achebe uses the present novel as an instrument to protest against the European disturbance of African culture as well as the disturbance that comes from within the society: "If things were perfect, there would be no need for writers to write their novels. But it is because they see a vision of the world which is better than what exists: it is because they see the possibilities of man rising higher than he has risen at the moment that they write. So, whatever they write, if they are true practitioners of their art, would be in essence a protest against what exists, against what is." (Kalu Ogbaa, 4).

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