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Fishing in Troubled Waters: Exploring and Exposing Eurocentric Iconoclasms in Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

There can be no reason to refute or debate concerning the depths and breaths of cultural conundrums which Achebe has endeavored to unearth concerning his home country and clan by making Things Fall Apart as a master piece and a foreground into the writing of novels for the people of the third world countries around the world. The paper brings to the forefront the ways Achebe has attempted to give a structural shape to the agony of being under the boots of the English in the name of being a beast. There is also another side to the story, the way the westerners look at the colonized and their writings is also discussed in the said article.

Key Words : Colonization, Savagery, Culture, Commotion

Chinua Achebe is more close to Thomas Hardy in terms of the time line of his birth and career span. Hardy was born in the fag-end of Victorian era and lived till the beginning and proliferation of modernism. Achebe on the other hand, was born in the beginnings of the latter part of modern age and continued to live until the post modern times. This is to say that he has had a long literary legacy like Hardy and hence his contributions to literature have been immense and impeccable. The first novel, Things Fall Apart was published when Achebe was twenty eight years old, which is 1958 and he lived until 2013, the ripe age of eighty two. The long literary

journey had been arduous and challenging for him which made him traverse from being called the father to the grandfather of African literature.

The novel has had two cardinal influences, the first is his Achebe's reading of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, where the author had discussed in detail about the struggles of Marlow, the narrator with the savages who had been jumping in the beaches. This very thought made Achebe write a book and he told himself that if he did not sit to write, correct and contradict, there would be none to notice or notify the westerns about the true meaning of being a savage and being a human, a palpable human being at all. The other was his walk across the university of London where he met one of the students there who asked him what he had been trying to teach at the University, with Achebe replying him that he was to teach the literary history of Africa. The student was baffled at the answer because he felt that there was nothing new for Africa or the Africans to offer the world. In a very modest manner, since then, Achebe identified himself as one of the savages whom Conrad had labeled and wanted to tell the world of the universal appeal of literature to the entire humanity. Apart from the corrective measures that art offered life and vice-versa, there is a sense of didacticism which he wishes to teach through his novels that would in the long run reach the future. The quote below is an excerpt from the essay, Novelist as a Teacher where the title is itself self explanatory to establish the role of a novelist in the society.

> I am assuming that our writer and his society live in the same place. I realize that a lot has been made of the allegations that African writers have to write for European and American readers because African readers where they exist are only interested in reading textbooks. I don't know if the African writers have a foreign audience in mind….Here

then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse, to help my society regain its belief and put away the complexities of denigration and self-abasement. (42-44)

The novel Things Fall Apart is not only the most widely translated African piece of writing, which amounts to have been translated to over forty five languages, but it is also the most read of all African novels. Achebe himself is not sure to point out any other work apart from the said novel written by any other writer in Nigeria to gain prominence and recognition as much as and as far as Things Fall Apart has held. The title, is loosely taken from the poem of W.B.Yeats', The Second Coming where the poet envisions a beast getting into Bethlehem to pin point the end of goodness and the beginning of evil. The beast might be anything according to the perception of Yeats; it could signify war, it could mean Industrialization or even anything else but he was critical of the animalistic nature setting its tentacles to the road of destruction and catastrophe. Achebe in the same line interpreted the beast to the erosion of his own indigenous culture and the Igbo values.

Robert Heinman was one of the first publishers whom Achebe sent the manuscript of the novel to during one of his training tenures at London, he was sent to, when he was working for the Nigerian Broadcast. Many months after the handing over the script there was not any sign of hope or appeasement from Heinman because the publisher was concerned about the takers of the novel because the contents were highly anti colonial. More than that, he was unsure of how Europeans would respond to reading a novel written by an African in English. After much untiring efforts by Achebe, a modest number of one million copies were published and then the rest is history. The reason Achebe wanted to write was to make sure that Umofia, had been a

utopia before the advent of the British missionaries who had their own ways of life and cultural practices.

There was also the problem of double culture, or rather the culture vulture that was imminent when Achebe wrote the novel. It was a time when his parents were strict Catechists asking Achebe to read the Bible all day and night. On the flip side, was the family of his uncles who offered food to God and had been the staunch abider of traditional Igbo culture. To rise above the double trouble, Achebe set the novel a generation before, the time when his parents were young, he travelled time and sectioned his novel to three distinct parts. The first one begins with Okonkwo's life as a hardworking peasant and a stringent patriarch. The second section is about his exile and punishment and the third marks the arrival of the missionaries, his tussle with them and the subsequent suicide. The setting of the novel to pre-colonial times makes the reader understand how Africa , especially Eastern Nigeria had gone to dogs and come to ruins after colonization. David Whittaker in the work, Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart gives an insight into the contrived convulsions of culture which had troubled him as a child and still plagued him as a writer. These were some of the many reasons as to why he decided to pen down a novel to question and also emancipate his clan and their practices.

> What I do remember is a fascination for the ritual and life on the other arm of cross roads. Both my parents were strong and even sometimes uncompromising in their Christian beliefs, but they were not fanatical…My father's half brother was not the only heathen in our extended family, if anything, he was among the majority. Our home was open to them and my father received his peers and relatives, Christians or not, with Kola nut and palm wine. (3)

Achebe was keen on not making Oknowo a super hero or an epic hero but rather made him a man who had his own weaknesses and fragilities. In a way, the novel was to demystify himself from the way the white people had been presented in all writings of Europe where a good white man would walk across the dense forests, evading the dangers of animal attack to make the Africans Christians and even humane. All through his childhood Achebe had believed the story and hence felt that he must always be on the side of the white people until he reached college and found out the truth himself about the differences between what he saw and what he believed. All that he wants the white people to do is to sit and listen to the problems of being colonized because to him, the one who is pressed and squeezed in the boots of the white men cannot be asked be to in the shoes of the Africans and empathize with them. In a nut shell, Achebe wrote to bring into the world a sense of respect which the Europeans have long declined to give the colonized calling them savages and barbarians which in reality was not.

The novel from its very beginning does not have a proper time line. The first few lines speak of Okonkwo who is forty, a man with solid achievement and a strong position among his clan. The next paragraph gets to talk about his defeating Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling bout, the time he was eighteen and then the following paragraph talks about how he detested his father Unoka who was unsuccessful in life and had done nothing to keep himself or his family safe and honored. Okonkwo had the habit of stammering when he was angry and when this anger went out of control he would use his fists to establish a point or an idea. His father was a jolly good man and spent his time playing flute and getting into a pile of debts. These were things which his son did not like and never did want to keep his wife or children poor or low in front of the people of his clan. The very beginning of the novel sets the ball rolling where Okonkwo is contrasted with his father, a successful failure and as a son he never took his father as his role model and

emulate any of his practices or laid back life. This is to show the English that the Africans too had a lot of self esteem and they were not like how the English thought. In one of the interviews, given to BBC Achebe mentions about a governor general, whose name he withholds, the general had told him that the partnership between an African and a white man is the one that is between a horse rider and a horse. This is proof enough to show how beastly the westerners have seen them and how it had been essential to prove them wrong. The quote below from the novel gives an overview of how Okonkwo lived and behaved.

> He was tall and huge and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave him a severe look. He breathed heavily and it was said that, when he slept, his wife and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs as if he was going to pounce on somebody. (1)

In the initial section of the novel, every attempt has been made to project Okokwo as a powerful man among his clan and at the same time, there are mentions of his flaws because he was created as a character to share solidarity with the people around the world, who had come up in life, been self made and measured success in terms of the laurels they held, the money they possessed and the values they attach themselves to their family. In many ways Achebe had made clear that the Igbo was a patriarchal society and the number of wives a man had rested on the accomplishments he had made.

There are certain things which the English do not wish to accept or agree with regard to the way the Achebe has created his central character Okonkwo where he stands tall on the one side as a representative of a tradition and an ardent protector of his culture. On the other hand, he has strong prejudice against the English way of life, especially their religion which Okonkwo

rigorously refutes. The other is the way, the practices which go into the novel like the character of Ikemefuna who had been brought from the neighboring village as an exchange of a punishment and Okonkwo kills him with a machete to prove his manliness. The attitudes of human sacrifice, the way his own clan rejected Okonkwo when he dies hanging because suicide is not permitted in the Igbo culture are something which the Europeans still feel that they have been right in calling the Africans savages. Even the slightest incident where Oberika, shares some snuff with Okonkwo in a village party are seen as signs of cultural decadence. The novel on the whole can be seen as a fitting example to the beginnings of post colonialism but in a way Achebe wanted to drive home the view that his people have a way of life and they are humans and must be seen as one and not as mere horses or beasts.

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