

Emergence of African Faultline in Western History: A Study of *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe, a Nigerian novelist, poet, professor and critic, was raised in the Igbo town of Ogidi in Eastern Nigeria. Fascinated with world religions and traditional African cultures, his novels focus on the traditions of Igbo society, the effects of Christian influence and the clash between African and Western values during and after the colonial era. His style relies heavily on Igbo oral traditions, folk stories, proverbs and oratory. His works adequately represent an early African nationalist tradition that repudiates the imperialist and colonialist ideology. The aim of this paper is to focus on the complexities of ‘Inculturation’ of African communities within Western cultural framework whose conflictual syncretism created a faultline within social, cultural and religious aspects of African life.

Key words: African Faultline, Colonialist ideology, Imperialist, Inculturation

Achebe’s novel depicts an apocalyptic vision of the world. A world without order and stability, fallen into anarchy owing to the flaws in humanity. Achebe makes use of this Christian mytheme in his novel to foreground disintegration of the complex Igbo society following the intrusion of European government, religion and technology and thereby co-opting and controlling the past of African culture under Western historical framework. The novel is a case study as to how social, linguistic and religious cultures and value system of

Igbo people were undermined, displaced and obliterated by the so-called Eurocentric forces. Alien point of view represents Igbo community as uncivilized, superstitious and barbaric. European fictions have portrayed Africa as a savage continent living in darkness. African characters are reduced to the category of mysterious, earthy and primitive creatures whose being is formed by erratic impulse rather than reason. The superimposition of Western Christian worldview onto the African was historically justified as being progressive, modern and civilized. The Western scholars including Kant, Hegel, JS Mill, William Jones, Conrad, and Forster among so many others had acceded to colonization as the extension of Project Enlightenment and in one or the other way helped perpetrate hegemony of Western worldview.

From the colonial perspective, it is impossible to understand the Igbo traditions and its integral unity at the metaphysical level which supports various and different aspects of their society with non-aggressiveness. It is attempted here to underscore the biased positions of Western intellectuals, processes of colonization and enculturation of African societies by the West whose reflections in the text produce a non-European version of history in the form of fiction. This a-rational category of fiction, much against European penchant for history, provides us an image of African society in its historical circumstances, an image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meanings and values.

However, a serious problem with Christian Enculturation as practiced in Africa is that it seeks to strip nativeness of what Christians see as baggage, thereby secularizing the culture. This approach fails to see that this nativeness consists profoundly symbolic images, ceremonies, attitudes, rituals and customs which are fully intelligible only in the light of its core spiritual principles. The policy of this enculturation is to 'tolerate' not just non-Christian cultural symbols but also non-Christian religious sentiments to dilute its differences and eventually digest it.

Traditions of Igbo society:

The narrative of the story draws heavily on the values of rural tradition of Igbo people. The proverbs and folk stories of Igbo tradition consists both a philosophical insight and general

public understanding. For example, the folk tales about the Earth and the Sky describe the interdependency of the masculine and the feminine.

To reflect the realities of Igbo traditions, ceremonial dancing and the singing of folk songs are woven into the narrative style of the novel. For example, Uchendu, the elder of the village, when attempts to shake Okonkwo out of his self-pity refer to a song sung after the death of a woman: 'For whom is it well, for whom is it well? There is no one for whom it is well.' (p 49) This song is in exact contrast with the song sung by the white missionaries later in the novel, 'Gay and rollicking tunes of evangelism.' (p 53)

Also, throughout the novel, characters listen or narrate the traditional stories from the society's past and stories that talk about the culture's values. Achebe weaves Igbo proverbs into the dialogues of the characters to clarify a point, to teach a lesson to characters and to provide humour. One can see that Achebe is trying to correct the stereotype beliefs and concepts spread by the west about Igbo society that too with a message that the oral traditions of their society is the only reason for their survival in the world. These traditions of storytelling, rituals for planting, harvesting and their belief of human passage for salvation helped them sustain and helped African people maintain an orderly society. For Example, Uchendu makes use of native proverb 'Never kill a man who says nothing' and to explain his point he tells a story of a Mother Kite and her daughter.

The history of tribe's origin (this native history is termed as myth by the colonizers) sets the keynote of its entire mode of self-apprehension and structure of knowledge. The prominence assumed by rituals in the culture is a constant recall of their foundations. All these rituals ensure that time is lived continuously and intensely and not just experienced as static category in the mode of duration. This presence of time is ensured by the eternal presence of their ancestors, 'The land of living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors'. (p 86)

The culture of Umuofia functions through its foundational myth in the collective life. The system of belief related to myth serves as the measure of social control in the administration

of justice. For example, Egwuwus are considered as incarnations of ancestors, endows the laws and customs of the land with a sacred sanction. Moreover, the value systems governing the society are constantly re-examined, debated and rationalized at some intervals by the elders of the town such as Ezeudu, Ezenwa and Obierika. This makes the Umuofia village primordial locus of civility which is in sharp contrast to the colonial anthropology.

The Process of Colonization:

The storyline of *Things Fall Apart* revolves around the idea of the intersection of Igbo traditions and European colonization. It deals with the Igbo of the East, specifically with their 19th and early 20th century associations with European missionaries and imperialists. In 1861, Great Britain occupied Lagos on the western edge of the Nigeria coastline. Slowly England began to occupy the rest of Nigeria, and in 1884, at Berlin Conference England declared Nigeria as its colony.

Achebe describes this process of colonization at two levels in his novel. 1. The life of Igbos before Europeans came to their town and 2. The life of Igbos as colony. The first part of the novel, i.e., the first thirteen chapters, presents the setting of the Igbo tribal society within which the characters have their being in all its specificity. Their daily routines and seasonal rituals attuned to the natural rhythms of the environment. The use of their native language of their daily intercourse lends them mobilization of minds and sensibilities within the society. The even cadence that marks the collective life in its normal course is summed up at one point in a simple yet effective way, 'In this way, the moons and the seasons passed'. (p.39) The description of the New Yam Festival throws light on the harmonious communal co-existence. It makes readers understand that this coherence guarantees the social order in its natural flow and establishes system of value which regulates collective life. It is this intense quality of life that is conveyed symbolically by the drum. The omnipresence of drum enforces the larger vision of the community in manifesting a vitalism inherent in and interwoven with community's organic mode of existence.

The second part of the novel deals with the changes that Igbo society undergoes as a colony. The arrival of Christian missionaries, violently and completely shaken and shattered the religious, cultural and social fabric of Igbo society and led to internal division. This division

inspired many outcasts of Igbos to join Christianity. These outcasts Igbos were given an elevated status in Christian value system. So, they feel excited about the new opportunities and techniques the European missionaries brought with them. The villagers in general felt caught between the dilemma of embracing the new system or rejecting the change that was taking place in their society and thus uprooting their native value system and traditions. This change was removing the mastery of traditional methods of farming, harvesting, cooking and building. These traditional methods of observing and preserving their legacy, once crucial for survival, are now dispensable. This change created the African faultline in the society of Igbo people. This faultline can best be explained in Nwoye's conversion to Christianity. It marks the boy's hatred for his own father, Okonkwo. This conversion ultimately results not only in his disaffection for his father but also in his alienation from the very tradition he belongs. His conversion acts as a prelude to the refinement of mind and sensibility that the new religion promised. This act of conversion of natives was viewed as a necessary step to justify the colonization. This projection of religious conversion wreaked havoc among the natives and the lands of Africa. They look at African society as a courage that the colonists need to 'civilize'. The main motive of this conversion ideology was to create a separatist identity, history and even religion for the vulnerable outcasts of Igbo society.

To enhance the act of conversion of Africans into Christians, the missionaries used their African interlocutors to engage in interfaith dialogue with their fellow natives to disarm the targeted population in the guise of friendly intentions of 'One God', 'One World' and 'The Same'. The assertion of 'everyone is the same' is based on misleading concept of 'One World'. This concept of 'One World' is nothing but a superficial cultural element that emerged under the western domination of different parts of one planet. i. e. the Earth. What is required is to respect these differences and not to make it one in the name of religion, colour or culture or to eradicate these differences. The West needs to understand that these differences are very natural things for the people of other lands i. e. non-Christians. In countries like Africa and India these differences are not a problem to be solved. In fact, these differences are integral part of their traditions and cultures and the whole existence of their society rests on them. And above all, if there exists the concept 'Everyone is the same' at all, then there is no need of conversion too.

However, what is needed to be understood is that the same differences when talked about keeping at center from the western perspective, these differences turns to be positive one! In *Things Fall Apart*, the conversation between Mr. Brown and the village elder Akunna shows the hypocrisy of the missionaries: "You say that there is one supreme God who made heaven and earth," said Akunna on one of Mr. Brown's visits. "We also believe in Him and call Him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods." "There are no other gods," said Mr. Brown. "Chukwu is the only God and all others are false. You carve a piece of wood--like that one" (he pointed at the rafters from which Akunna's carved Ikenga hung), "and you call it a god. But it is still a piece of wood." "Yes," said Akunna. "It is indeed a piece of wood. The tree from which it came was made by Chukwu, as indeed all minor gods were. But He made them for His messengers so that we could approach Him through them. It is like yourself. You are the head of your church." "No," protested Mr. Brown. "The head of my church is God Himself." "I know," said Akunna, "but there must be a head in this world among men. Somebody like yourself must be the head here." "The head of my church in that sense is in England." "That is exactly what I am saying. The head of your church is in your country. He has sent you here as his messenger. And you have also appointed your own messengers and servants. Or let me take another example, the District Commissioner. He is sent by your king." (p 63)

The colonists claimed that their actions are nothing but an act of justice through which they want to bring 'civilization' for Igbo people and thus retain their original glory which they possessed once.

- In 1912, the colonists instituted the Collective Punishment Ordinance, which made it lawful to perform genocide against the entire village for crimes committed against the 'whites', i. e. the colonists. Many villagers were condemned just because as they were fighting against them to save their lands and habitats and not because they were 'criminals'.
- To justify their act of using Africans as slaves and the difference of skin colour, the colonists used the Hamitic myth of the Bible, in which the descendants of Noah's son Ham were cursed into perpetual slavery. Thus, fictional stories of Biblical mythology were used to shape colonial ethnology, Africans as descendants of Ham, being

sinner's descendants their inferior place in the world, their black colour as a punishment for Ham's sin.

- The African societies were portrayed by the Biblical myths of Noah's deluge, the curse on Ham and the Tower of Babel. African civilization's traditions and rituals and historical facts were represented as the work of an imaginary sub-race of whites invading and civilizing Africa.

Even today, this justification is accepted as a standard interpretation of the histories and cultures of the then colonies like Africa and India. Achebe through this novel emphasizes that Africa is neither the silent or incomprehensible continent the way it is represented by these Biblical myths and nor the barbaric or savage the books like *Heart of Darkness* describes it to be. He has appropriated the narratives of colonialist writers like Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad who have always represented Africa and African communities as primitive by displacing its history.

Western scholars and westernized Africans are habituated to sculpturing native African traditions and rituals onto western framework and this approach is faulty and problematic. However, this view is so camouflaged in the name of helping the poor and the downtrodden that the main object of breaking Africa's unity and the implementation of faultline within the African society seems fair even to the natives too! A handful of westernized Africans are empowered by the west (they are nothing but puppets in the hands of the west) to run the whole business of shaking the national integrity and thus weakening the roots of nativeness. These few puppet Africans receive funds and incentives from the west in the name of helping and saving the minorities and outcasts by providing them food, shelter, clothes and education (this education is nothing but whitewashing the native roots and watering the western concepts). This creates a gap within the African society. This identity conflict led Africa to one of the worst ethnic genocides ever in the world.

This gap has created so deep a faultline within the African society and it has so alienated even the African themselves that they too have accepted the western version of their origin! On the one hand there are writers like Chinua Achebe who tries to make the world understand

the nobility of his race, however on the other side we have writers like Phyllis Wheatley and Josiah Priest who hold the opinion that their country needs to be ‘civilized’.

What is required in this world today is not sameness but a mutual respect for the differences that exist in this world. There is no one standard of civilization but as many as civilizational cultures exist and among them too the differences are to be celebrated instead of eradicating or devouring them.

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