

ETHICS OF AFRICAN'S TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART : A STUDY

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Abstract

African literature is a manifestation of African society, culture, historical and political experience. African literary artists therefore aim at among others, projecting their culture to the world. This is a feat that Achebe and his contemporaries have accomplished with admiration. Thus, an African artist functions in the African society as the recorder of the mores and experience of his people, society and the voice of vision of his time. These are the parameters for judging Achebe in his *Things Fall Apart*. Working through the canons of the Hallidayan Systemic linguistics and Stylistics, this exploration reveals specifically African admirable and commendable system of government, justice, religion, and respect for life, love and marriage, even before colonization. Though Achebe's hallmark is the revitalization, exposition and celebration of the African cultural heritage, he nevertheless reveals those intolerable aspects of his Igbo culture that needed to be eliminated without hesitation. Ekwefi's character is one of the most significant characters in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. She possess the qualities which distinguish her of Okonkwo's other wives. Even she seems to have less drawbacks than the protagonist of the novel. In the novel she has been described as beautiful youth and second wife of Okonkwo. Her bold action was as she ran from her previous husband and came to live with Okonkwo, in a patriarchal society. She loved wrestling and it might be the reason that she liked Okonkwo. In society, women were dominated by men. They were fated to be satisfied mens' lust for sex, give birth to children and bring up them. She had suffered much in married life. Nine of her children died in infancy and Ezinma was the tenth of them who was the purpose of her life. Not only she is the most intelligent and confident among Okonkwo's wives but the most strongest character in novel. She chased the priest in darkness for the sake of her daughter and sworn even to stand against the deities. She had heroic qualities and less weak points in her character through out the novel. Sometimes her understanding of things and judgment seem more than Okonkwo.

Keywords: African Literature, Stylistics, Culture and Cultural Revitalization, Bold, Courageous, heroic qualities, intelligent, judgment.

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS OF AFRICAN'S TRADITIONAL CULTURE :

The term Ethics is generally used in two senses, one as motivation based on ideas of right and wrong and another one as the philosophical study of moral values and rules. The former deals with values which are right or wrong as they guide people's actions; the later deals with the analysis of the rightness or wrongness of human actions. In all ages and cultures, human beings have exhibited certain defining qualities. Whether at the rudimentary stage of social interactions characteristic of primeval cultures, or at the highly sophisticated level of social engineering of modern life, human societies have always been preserved through a complex network of laws, ethics and the enforcement of justice. Except, perhaps in the Hobbesian state of nature (where the only operating rule is that of survival of the fittest) every human society, functioning within the confines of social contract, has its own system of values which gives rise to norms that are responsible for the day-to-day ordering of the society. For harmonious living, the values and norms therefrom, must be respected, and a system of redress/punishment put in place to discourage dissent. Achebe's literary genius lies not only in his originality, but also in his ability to couch everyday lives in simple prose that significantly contrast the socio-political ordering of traditional African communities with those of the West. An in-depth analysis of his Opus magnum, *Things Fall Apart* reveals that at the heart of the narrative of a people's worldview which E. B. Tylor [1920 (1871)] pejoratively termed primitive", lie a revered ethical system, a transforming "judicial process and a robust check and balance structure as ballasts to human excesses. In the following paragraphs, we shall attempt to situate the actions of the principal characters in *Things Fall Apart* within the general framework of ethics, law and justice which Africans were known for, even before the advent of colonialism.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Chinua Achebe was one of the most important African writers of the last century. He was also considered by many to be one of the most original literary artists writing in English during his lifetime. He is best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe, Chinua Achebe was raised by Christian evangelical parents in the large village Ogidi, in Igboland, Eastern Nigeria. He received an early education in English, but grew up surrounded by a complex fusion of Igbo traditions and colonial legacy. He studied literature and medicine at the University of Ibadan; after graduating, he went to work for the Nigerian Broadcasting Company in Lagos and later studied at the British Broadcasting Corporation staff school in London. Her work of the novels are *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* (1964), *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). And some of her short stories are *Marriage Is a Private Affair* (1952), *Dead Men's Path* (1953), *The Sacrificial Egg and Other Stories* (1953), *Civil Peace* (1971).

During this time, Achebe was developing work as a writer. Starting in the 1950s, he was central to a new Nigerian literary movement that drew on the oral traditions of Nigeria's indigenous tribes. Although Achebe wrote in English, he attempted to incorporate Igbo vocabulary and narratives.

ETHICS OF AFRICAN'S TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART : A STUDY

Things Fall Apart is about the tragic fall of the protagonist, Okonkwo, and the Igbo culture. Okonkwo is a respected and influential leader within the Igbo community of Umuofia in eastern Nigeria. He first earns personal fame and distinction, and brings honor to his village, when he defeats Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling contest. Okonkwo determines to gain titles for himself and become a powerful and wealthy man in spite of his father's weaknesses. Okonkwo's father, Unoka, was a lazy and wasteful man. He often borrowed money and then squandered it on palm-wine and merrymaking with friends. Consequently, his wife and children often went hungry. Within the community, Unoka was considered a failure and a laughingstock. He was referred to as *agbala*, one who resembles the weakness of a woman and has no property. Unoka died a shameful death and left numerous debts. Okonkwo despises and resents his father's gentle and idle ways. He resolves to overcome the shame that he feels as a result of his father's weaknesses by being what he considers to be "manly"; therefore, he dominates his wives and children by being insensitive and controlling. Because Okonkwo is a leader of his community, he is asked to care for a young boy named Ikemefuna, who is given to the village as a peace offering by neighboring Mbaino to avoid war with Umuofia. Ikemefuna befriends Okonkwo's son, Nwoye, and Okonkwo becomes inwardly fond of the boy.

Over the years, Okonkwo becomes an extremely volatile man; he is apt to explode at the slightest provocation. He violates the Week of Peace when he beats his youngest wife, Ojiugo, because she went to braid her hair at a friend's house and forgot to prepare the afternoon meal and feed her children. Later, he severely beats and shoots a gun at his second wife, Ekwefi, because she took leaves from his banana plant to wrap food for the Feast of the New Yam. After the coming of the locusts, Ogbuefi Ezeuder, the oldest man in the village, relays to Okonkwo a message from the Oracle. The Oracle says that Ikemefuna must be killed as part of the retribution for the Umuofian woman killed three years earlier in Mbaino. He tells Okonkwo not to partake in the murder, but Okonkwo doesn't listen. He feels that not participating would be a sign of weakness. Consequently, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna with his machete. Nwoye realizes that his father has murdered Ikemefuna and begins to distance himself from his father and the clansmen.

Okonkwo becomes depressed after killing Ikemefuna, so he visits his best friend, Obierika, who disapproves of his role in Ikemefuna's killing. Obierika says that Okonkwo's act will upset the Earth and the earth goddess will seek revenge. After discussing Ikemefuna's death with Obierika, Okonkwo is finally able to sleep restfully, but he is awakened by his wife Ekwefi. Their daughter Ezinma, whom Okonkwo is fond of, is dying. Okonkwo gathers grasses, barks, and leaves to prepare medicine for Ezinma. A public trial is held on the village commons. Nine clan leaders, including Okonkwo, represent the spirits of their ancestors. The nine clan leaders, or *egwugwu*, also represent the nine villages of Umuofia. Okonkwo does not sit among the other eight leaders, or elders, while they listen to a dispute between an estranged husband and wife. The wife, Mgbafo, had been severely beaten by her husband. Her brother took her back to their family's village, but her husband wanted her back home. The *egwugwu* tell the husband to take wine to his in-laws and beg his wife to come home. One elder wonders why such a trivial dispute would come before the *egwugwu*.

In her role as priestess, Chielo tells Ekwefi (Okonkwo's second wife) that *Agbala* (the Oracle of the Hills and Caves) needs to see Ezinma. Although Okonkwo and Ekwefi protest, Chielo takes a terrified Ezinma on her back and forbids anyone to follow. Chielo carries Ezinma to all nine villages and then enters the Oracle's cave. Ekwefi follows secretly, in spite of Chielo's admonitions, and waits at the entrance of the Oracle. Okonkwo surprises Ekwefi by arriving at the cave, and he also waits with her. The next morning, Chielo takes Ezinma to Ekwefi's hut and puts her to bed. When Ogbuefi Ezeudu dies, Okonkwo worries because the last time that Ezeudu visited him was when he warned Okonkwo against participating in the killing of Ikemefuna. Ezeudu was an important

leader in the village and achieved three titles of the clan's four, a rare accomplishment. During the large funeral, Okonkwo's gun goes off, and Ezeudu's sixteen-year-old son is killed accidentally.

Because the accidental killing of a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo and his family must be exiled from Umuofia for seven years. The family moves to Okonkwo's mother's native village, Mbanta. After they depart Umuofia, a group of village men destroy Okonkwo's compound and kill his animals to cleanse the village of Okonkwo's sin. Obierika stores Okonkwo's yams in his barn and wonders about the old traditions of the Igbo culture. Okonkwo is welcomed to Mbanta by his maternal uncle, Uchendu, a village elder. He gives Okonkwo a plot of land on which to farm and build a compound for his family. But Okonkwo is depressed, and he blames his chi (or personal spirit) for his failure to achieve lasting greatness. During Okonkwo's second year in exile, he receives a visit from his best friend, Obierika, who recounts sad news about the village of Abame: After a white man rode into the village on a bicycle, the elders of Abame consulted their Oracle, which told them that the white man would destroy their clan and other clans. Consequently, the villagers killed the white man. But weeks later, a large group of men slaughtered the villagers in retribution. The village of Abame is now deserted.

Okonkwo and Uchendu agree that the villagers were foolish to kill a man whom they knew nothing about. Later, Obierika gives Okonkwo money that he received from selling Okonkwo's yams and seed-yams, and he promises to do so until Okonkwo returns to Umuofia. Six missionaries, including one white man, arrive in Mbanta. The white man speaks to the people about Christianity. Okonkwo believes that the man speaks nonsense, but his son, Nwoye, is captivated and becomes a convert of Christianity. The Christian missionaries build a church on land given to them by the village leaders. However, the land is a part of the Evil Forest, and according to tradition, the villagers believe that the missionaries will die because they built their church on cursed land. But when nothing happens to the missionaries, the people of Mbanta conclude that the missionaries possess extraordinary power and magic. The first recruits of the missionaries are efulefu, the weak and worthless men of the village. Other villagers, including a woman, soon convert to Christianity. The missionaries then go to Umuofia and start a school. Nwoye leaves his father's hut and moves to Umuofia so he can attend the school.

Okonkwo's exile is over, so his family arranges to return to Umuofia. Before leaving Mbanta, they prepare a huge feast for Okonkwo's mother's kinsmen in appreciation of their gratitude during Okonkwo's seven years of exile. When Okonkwo returns to Umuofia, he discovers that the village has changed during his absence. Many men have renounced their titles and have converted to Christianity. The white men have built a prison; they have established a government court of law, where people are tried for breaking the white man's laws; and they also employ natives of Umuofia. Okonkwo wonders why the Umuofians have not incited violence to rid the village of the white man's church and oppressive government. Some members of the Igbo clan like the changes in Umuofia. Mr. Brown, the white missionary, respects the Igbo traditions. He makes an effort to learn about the Igbo culture and becomes friendly with some of the clan leaders. He also encourages Igbo people of all ages to get an education. Mr. Brown tells Okonkwo that Nwoye, who has taken the name Isaac, is attending a teaching college. Nevertheless, Okonkwo is unhappy about the changes in Umuofia. After Mr. Brown becomes ill and is forced to return to his homeland, Reverend James Smith becomes the new head of the Christian church. But Reverend Smith is nothing like Mr. Brown; he is intolerant of clan customs and is very strict.

Violence arises after Enoch, an overzealous convert to Christianity, unmasks an egwugwu. In retaliation, the egwugwu burn Enoch's compound and then destroy the Christian church because the missionaries have caused the Igbo people many problems. When the District Commissioner returns to Umuofia, he learns about the destruction of the church and asks six leaders of the village, including Okonkwo, to meet with him. The men are jailed until they pay a fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries. The people of Umuofia collect the money and pay the fine, and the men are set free. The next day at a meeting for clansmen, five court messengers who intend to stop the gathering approach the group. Suddenly, Okonkwo jumps forward and beheads the man in charge of the messengers with his machete. When none of the other clansmen attempt to stop the messengers who escape, Okonkwo realizes that they will never go to war and that Umuofia will surrender. Everything has fallen apart for Okonkwo; he commits suicide by hanging himself

THEMES

Memory/Documentary

Digression is one of Achebe's main tools. The novel is the story of Okonkwo's tragedy, but it is also a record of Igbo life before the coming of the white man. The novel documents what the white man destroyed. The reader learns much about Igbo customs and traditions; depicting this world is a central part of the novel.

Social disintegration

Towards the end of the novel, we witness the events by which Igbo society begins to fall apart. Religion is threatened, Umuofia loses its self-determination, and the very centers of tribal life are threatened. These events are all the more painful for the reader because so much time has been spent in sympathetic description of Igbo life; the reader realizes that he has been learning about a way of life that no longer exists.

Greatness and ambition

Okonkwo is determined to be a lord of his clan. He rises from humble beginnings to a position of leadership, and he is a wealthy man. He is driven and determined, but his greatness comes from the same traits that are the source of his weaknesses. He is often too harsh with his family, and he is haunted by a fear of failure.

Fate and free will

There is an Igbo saying that when a man says yes, his chi, or spirit, says yes also. The belief that he controls his own destiny is of central importance to Okonkwo. Later, several events occur to undermine this belief, and Okonkwo is embittered by the experience. As often happens with tragedy, the catastrophe comes through a complex mix of external forces and the character's choices.

Masculinity

Masculinity is one of Okonkwo's obsessions, and he defines masculinity quite narrowly. For him, any kind of tenderness is a sign of weakness and effeminacy. Male power lies in authority and brute force. But throughout the novel, we are shown men with more sophisticated understanding of masculinity. Okonkwo's harshness drives Nwoye away from the family and into the arms of the new religion.

Fear

For all of his desire to be strong, Okonkwo is haunted by fear. He is profoundly afraid of failure, and he is afraid of being considered weak. This fear drives him to rashness, and in the end contributes to his death.

Tribal belief

Particularly since one of the threats to Igbo life is the coming of the new religion, tribal belief is a theme of some importance. Igbo religious beliefs explain and provide meaning to the world; the religion is also inextricable from social and political institutions. Achebe also shows that Igbo religious authorities, such as the Oracle, seem to possess uncanny insights. He approaches the matter of Igbo religion with a sense of wonder.

Justice

Justice is another powerful preoccupation of the novel. For the Igbo, justice and fairness are matters of great importance. They have complex social institutions that administer justice in fair and rational ways. But the coming of the British upsets that balance. Although the British claim that local laws are barbaric, and use this claim as an excuse to impose their own laws, we soon see that British law is hypocritical and inhumane. The final events leading up to Okonkwo's death concern the miscarriage of Justice under the British District Commissioner.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Okonkwo's most prominent internal conflict, the fear of failure and weakness, destroyed his life and has made him a cruel man. His uncontrollable anger is his another prominent flaw that keeps him away from true greatness. At the end, when Okonkwo committed suicide, he also committed the only thing he feared, and that was weakness.

One theme of the novel is that inability to adapt to changes can lead to one's downfall. This is shown in the conclusion, when Okonkwo hangs himself rather than submit to the laws of the British again. He has struggled with the clash of cultures ever since the missionaries built a church in Umuofia. Ezinma was the only child of Okonkwo's that he admired. He cared for her a great amount more than his other children and wished she was a male constantly because she displayed strength, knowledge, and didn't question what Okonkwo told her. Ikemefuna wasn't Okonkwo's child by blood, but in the middle of the novel he is a child-like figure in his life. Ikemefuna's death made Okonkwo feel sadness and vulnerability for one of the first times in his life and this showed a lot about how much Okonkwo admired him. Nwoye was the kid of Okonkwo's that he despised because he reminded him of his father who was lazy and careless. Nwoye adds a lot of stress to Okonkwo's life when he joins the Christian community. Each of these kids showed hidden parts of Okonkwo and that's why their existence in the novel is so important.

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