

Reading Achebe's Things Fall Apart from the Perspective of Cesaire's Discourse on Colonialism

Md. Mahbubul Alam¹

¹ Sylhet Cadet College

Received: 15 December 2013 Accepted: 31 December 2013 Published: 15 January 2014

Abstract

This article attempts to study Chinua Achebe's novel Things Fall Apart from the perspectives put forward in Aime Cesaire's anti-colonial text Discourse on Colonialism. For this purpose various thematic key-issues found in Discourse on Colonialism are studied first. These thematic key-issues include old African societies, representation, colonial effects, colonial Christianity, decolonization, flaws of civilization etc. In the text Aime Cesaire has strongly dealt with these issues. Then, in this paper each of these issues is thoroughly attempted on the basis of their having treated in Things Fall Apart. Finally, this paper shows that Things Fall Apart can well be analyzed by considering all the thematic concerns voiced by Cesaire.

Index terms— african societies, community, representation, colonial effects, christianity, nation, civilization.

1 I. Introduction

Aime Cesaire was born in 1913, in Martinique. Not only was Cesaire a distinguished poet and a playwright, but he was also an extraordinary political and cultural theorist and a revolutionary activist. Aime Cesaire was a keen supporter of decolonization within African-French colonies and he played a very important role in global anti-imperialist movements as a radical political activist and communist. Aime Cesaire's epoch making text Discourse on Colonialism is a key text of postcolonial literature. It is one of the main works in tidal wave of decolonization. In this text he brings forth strong arguments about the effects of colonialism. He presents the readers with compelling perspectives on the identities and the roles that the colonizer and the colonized assumed.

Discourse on Colonialism is labeled "a declaration of war" and "third world manifesto" (Kelley 2010: p. 07). This text exposes that Cesaire is very bitter towards the Europeans.

Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian writer. Nigeria, where Achebe was born in 1930, is home to enormous diversity of cultures of the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo communities. Achebe belongs to the Igbo community and is among the first to present Nigeria's history and cultures in his books with the construction of postcolonial identity of the peoples. Chinua Achebe's first novel Things Fall Apart (1958) is the magnum opus and widely acclaimed literary piece. Cesaire's opinion about colonialism is parallel to the ones that occur in Things Fall Apart. This book has many themes similar to those found in Discourse on Colonialism. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe depicts the complex, advanced social institutions and artistic traditions of the Igbo people before the advent of European colonization. The book describes the customs and society of the Igbo and the influence of British colonialism and Christian missionaries on the Igbo community during the late nineteenth century.

The present essay deals with various issues of Cesaire's concepts about colonialism as reflected in Discourse on Colonialism, and their applicability in Achebe's Things Fall Apart. This treatment does not mean that Achebe depends on Cesaire's ideas of colonialism while writing the text; it is because both of them have the experiences of being eyewitnesses of colonial oppression. Instead, we will see in this essay that unlike Cesaire, who in many cases conceives romantic ideology as a Marxist, Achebe denies and criticizes some aspects of native social realities that are not beyond question, in the depiction of Igbo society in Things Fall Apart.

2 II. Old African Societies

In *Discourse on Colonialism* about the old African societies, Aime Cesaire states-They were societies that were not only ante-capitalist? but also anti capitalist?They were communal societies, never societies of the many for the few?They were democratic societies?They were cooperative societies, fraternal societies?They kept hope intact. (p. 44) Indigenous African societies were not only 'ante-capitalist' but also 'anti-capitalist'. Before the coming of the colonizers those societies were free from the touch of discriminatory capitalist ideology. This was also the case of the pre-colonial Igboland. Before the advent of the colonial economy, capitalism was not imported in Igboland, "but extended kingship/ family system prescribed communal ownership of land by kindred" (Onyeozili and Ebbe 2012: p. 31).

the missionaries the people of Umuofia and Mbaino do not have any contact of capitalism. Their economy is based on agriculture. Some characters in the novel have been displayed with huge wealth, such as Nwakibie to whom Okonkwo once went and borrowed seed yams. About Nwakibie the author does not tell much but with that little information it is not difficult to realize that Nwakibie's wealth does not signify him as a capitalist. He is just a 'wealthy man' and possesses 'three huge barns' (p. 14). Through Nwakibie's speech anybody can identify that he has acquired the 'three huge barns' through his perseverance and devotion without exploiting anybody, unlike today's tycoons of capitalism. Old African societies were communal and democratic. There was deep community feeling among the people of those societies. Similarly, Igbo culture was built on a strong sense of devotion to community ??Booker 2003: p. 110) and cooperation. They put emphasis on public decision rather than central. As they were communal they were cooperative to each other.

In *Things Fall Apart* we observe the Igbo's sense of community as manifested in their social festivals and media of recreation. One of such festivals is New Yam Festival. The narrator says-

The New Yam Festival was thus an occasion for joy throughout Umuofia. And every man whose arm was strong, as the Ibo people say, was expected to invite large numbers of guests from far and wide. Okonkwo always asked his wives' relations, and since he now had three wives his guests would make a fairly big crowd. (P.

3 26, 27)

Apart from the festivals there are wrestling matches that provide communal recreation.

In *Things Fall Apart* we see people are cooperative to each other. Okonkwo in his earlier life went to Nwakibie to borrow seed-yams. At that time the elders had doubt about sincerity in the young generation. But Nwakibie helped him by giving him eight hundred seed-yams. (P. 15). When Okonkwo is exiled for seven years he takes shelter in his maternal uncle's house. All the people help him restart his life. Achebe describes the situation- Okonkwo was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen he built himself an obi and three huts for his wives. He then installed his personal god and the symbols of his departed fathers. Each of Uchendu's five sons contributed three hundred seed-yams to enable their cousin to plant a farm, for as soon as the first rain came farming would begin. (P. 91) Sentinaro and Chandra (2009) observe that the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* is not Okonkwo but Umuofia. Society wins over an individual in the Ibo society". (P. 192). This indicates that the society as a whole stands for the individual's existence.

According to Cesaire, the people of indigenous societies were optimistic and their hopes remained 'intact' even in their rainy days. In *Things Fall Apart* we also notice the people who are optimistic and hardworking. Throughout Okonkwo's life we will see that his wishes and efforts change his own circumstances. His starting life unlike other young men was full of challenges and odds and he did not inherit anything from his father. He always remains determined and optimistic in his struggling life. Even frequent natural calamities cannot deter his confidence and conviction (p. 17).

So, the above discussion reflects that Cesaire's ideas about indigenous African societies share proximity and relevance to the society depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

4 III. Representation

The colonial power represents the colonized world in false, artificial and negative ways. The Western intellectual world represents Africa in such ways. Cesaire indicates some intellectuals of this sort. For instance, he refers to Gourou whose book *Les Pays Tropicaux* expresses the fundamental "biased and unacceptable" thesis that "there has never been a great tropical civilization, that great civilizations have existed only in temperate climates, that in every tropical country the germ of civilization comes, and can only come, from some other place outside the tropics" ... (p.55). This book also narrates that-

The typical hot countries find themselves faced with the following dilemma: economic stagnation and protection of the natives or temporary economic development and regression of the natives. (p. 57)

Cesaire thinks that "the historians or novelists of civilization" of the West have "depraved passion for refusing to acknowledge any merit in the non-white races, especially the black-skinned races" (p. 55). Cesaire challenges these Western scholars' synthetic depiction of the East-Need I say that it is from a lofty height that the eminent scholar surveys the native populations?? (P. 56) At the end of *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe says that the District Commissioner has decided to write a book and the title of the book would be: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (p. 148). The title, which consists of disagreeable words like 'pacification', 'primitive'

etc., itself indicates that the perspective will be Western; the reader will not get the narrative what he/she has just finished reading "but a less objective and necessarily less accurate narrative" ??Kortenaar 1995: p. 31). It shows how erroneous the District Commissioner is because he thinks that he

The District Commissioner thinks about Okonkwo's suicide and wants to make a place for the suicide in his intended book. But he cannot decide whether he will use a chapter or paragraph for it in that book. The fake narrative of the district commissioner signifies the otherness of the Africans. Okonkwo's suicide seems to be mysterious and impenetrable in the eyes of the District Commissioner. This is that mystery which the West falsely thinks pervades the non-Western life. The readers of the proposed book will never know why Okonkwo has actually committed suicide; neither will they be able to know Okonkwo's severest abhorrence towards the Missionaries and the colonial administration since the writers of such books view the East from "lofty height" and refuse "to acknowledge any merit in the non-white races".

The idea that the tropical countries, as the European scholars claim, have no great civilizations and civilizations in those countries can come only from outside the tropics seems to be ironical in *Things Fall Apart*. In this text it is shown how colonialism destroys Igbo social structure that was organic and well-formed. This point will be elaborated in the next title "Colonial Effects". Only one is worth mentioning here that the Egyptian Civilization is now considered the mother of all civilizations in the world.

There was no 'economic stagnation', as Gourou in his book fallaciously maintains, in indigenous societies. We notice in *Things Fall Apart* a society where economically contented people live with hard labor to sustain their life. Even women contribute to economic solvency of their family by growing crops like cocoyams, beans and cassava (p.16). Another false statement about the indigenous societies referred in that book is that the native people of those societies lacked protection. But in *Things Fall Apart* we see before the coming of the colonial regime people had necessary security and they did not need police system for their security.

Therefore, Césaire's statement that Western scholars represent Africa artificially is justified by the portraiture of Igbo society in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

5 IV. Colonial Effects

According to Césaire, Bourgeois Europe has destroyed 'the root of diversity' (p. 76) and introduced the concept of the nation which is a bourgeois phenomenon (p. 74). Before the coming of colonialism African societies were culturally diverse. Colonialism tramples the diversity. The people were living in communal harmony but colonialism injects capitalism into their life spoils that communal harmony. About the effects of colonialism in Africa Césaire says-I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out. (P. 43) He also maintains that the Negro world has been 'disqualified' and 'mighty voices stilled forever' (p.74) as a result of colonial oppression. He comes to the conclusion that "colonization works to decivilize the colonizer?to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred?" (p. 35). The indigenous people lose their natural mutual integration and their vigor is destabilized.

Things Fall Apart significantly reflects the colonial effects on indigenous society. Before the advent of the colonial power the people of Umuofia lived in communal agreement in an organic society of economic, cultural, political, familial and religious stability. But colonial rule turns the social stability into instability and disintegration. The title of the novel itself signifies this claim-things are no longer in order; colonialism has disordered them.

Prior to colonialism in Igboland we see that people performed various cultural issues contently. But colonialism comes and imposes restrictions on those performances. The colonizers try to convince the native people that their cultures are illogical and groundless. This colonial mechanism makes the natives psychologically oscillating.

Before colonialism the native people had no idea about nation because they lived in community. Communal feelings were part and parcel of their life. But this sense of community is killed by Bourgeois Europe. Colonialism makes the Igbo 'drained of' their 'essence'. Okonkwo symbolizes the essence of Umuofia; the suicide of Okonkwo, which is also a colonial effect, signifies the suicide of Umuofia's essence. Colonialism makes 'extraordinary possibilities' of the indigenous people 'wiped out'. Okonkwo stands for that extraordinary possibility which is wiped out through his suicide. Okonkwo symbolizes that 'mighty voices' which Césaire claims is 'stilled forever' by the colonial power.

Césaire indicates colonial massacres that ironically make the colonizers decivilized. Millions of native people are massacred that awaken the colonizers "to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred". In *Things Fall Apart* we see the massacre in Abame, a village, by the white men. The event is described by Obierika-

The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home? The clan is now completely empty. Even the sacred fish in their mysterious lake have fled and the lake turned the colour of blood. (p. 98)

It is a forceful description of colonial massacre and bloody cruelty experienced by the natives. Césaire indicates colonial corruption. In *Things Fall Apart* a land is in dispute. Obierika describes how the problem is solved through corruption-

The white man's court has decided that it [the land] should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much

money to the white man's messengers and interpreters. (P. 124) Christianity plays very strong role in starting and consolidating colonial rule. Cesaire notes that the principal perpetrator is "Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity=civilization, paganism=savagery (p. 33). Christianity comes and "millions of men [were] torn from their gods" (p. 43). Christianity disagrees with the religious beliefs of the natives. It thinks that native religion is paganism and so it is nothing but savagery. In *Things Fall Apart* we frequently observe the colonizers' denial of native religion. Here is conversation between a native man and a white man about their respective religion-If we leave our gods and follow your god...who will protect us from the anger of our neglected gods and ancestors? (Native) Your gods are not alive and cannot do any harm? They are pieces of wood and stone. (White) (P. 103)

Cesaire claims that colonialism brings with it 'race hatred'. In *Things Fall Apart* Reverend James Smith is epitome of race hatred. The narrator says that Mr. Smith "saw things as black and white" where "black was evil" (p. 130). Colonial Christianity affects even the father-son relationship as we see in Okonkwo and his son Nwoye. Seeing Nwoye among the missionaries in Umuofia Obierika asks him, "How is your father?" Nwoye replies, "I don't know. He is not my father." Then Obierika comes to Okonkwo and sees that he is not interested to talk about Nwoye. (P. 101). So, Cesaire's position that colonialism brings with it cruelty, corruption, destruction, savagery and hatred towards the natives is justified by the depiction of colonized Igboland in *Things Fall Apart*.

V. Decolonization

Cesaire is not pessimist. He firmly declares that the mask of the colonizer has been opened and the Bourgeois Europe has already been persecuted by its own Hitler. It is paying the penalty claimed by the masses of inside and outside Europe. Cesaire affirms-The reader of *Things Fall Apart* can easily identify Obierika's inherent zeal of protest against the colonial masters. At the end of the novel Obierika openly hold the colonial power responsible for Okonkwo's suicide. The narrator describes-Obierika?turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man ??Okonkwo] was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself?" (p. 147).

It is an open challenge of Obierika to the District Commissioner. His accusation is direct and it expresses his decolonizing passion long buried in himself.

6 VI. Flaws of Civilization

Discourse on Colonialism begins with these statements-A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problems it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problems is a stricken civilization.

A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization. (P. 31)

It is true that Cesaire in these sentences indicates the weak points of the Western civilization. But we will use these statements to examine the indigenous African societies on the basis of Igbo society as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe described for the world the positive as well as the negative aspects of the Igbo people. Although the novel ends in an elegiac tone Achebe is by no means uncritical of the culture that he both celebrates and mourns.

Achebe shows that societies had its own contradictions and spiritual crises before the intrusion of colonialism. He presents Igbo culture that is not without flaws. The seeds of decay of the Igbo world are intrinsic.

The colonizers only accelerated the decay. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe considers that negative elements of Igbo culture were equally responsible along with colonization. ??Aggarwal 2013: p. 221) The society depicted in *Things Fall Apart* has its own problems and it cannot solve these problematic issues. One significant problem is treatment to the Osu

7 Volume XIV Issue IX Version I

And today the indictment is brought against it not by the European masses alone, but on a world scale, by tens and tens of millions of men who, from the depths of slavery, set themselves up as judges. (P. 32) Now the people once who were slaves under colonial dominance have become judges. This is the judgment of history. In *Things Fall Apart* from the outset of European colonization we see Okonkwo as a figure of protest against it. He cannot tolerate the missionaries. Even he expresses his grudges towards his fellow people who show their tolerance towards the colonial administration and the missionaries. He commits suicide and though to his own people his suicide his abomination, the readers can easily recognize the heroic existence in his suicide. He has killed one of the colonial staff and he does not want to be humiliated by the colonial administration in his life-time. It is undoubtedly a heroic death, heroic protest and a heroic verdict of judgment against colonialism. caste. The Osu are untouchable in the society. The narrator describes the Osu-"He was a person dedicated to a god, a thing set apart-a taboo forever, and his children after him. This description clearly shows that the Osu caste is a social discrimination. Where there is discrimination the society cannot progress. As a result of the inequity the Osus join the missionaries and they are the first converts to Christianity in Umuofia. By joining the missionaries they help the colonizer make the stance strong and it adds to the disintegration of the Umuofian people. The Osu caste is a social hole or the Achilles' Hill of Umuofia. The people of Umuofia cannot solve this issue. That is why this type of social problem adds to the injury of the society and helps make it 'decadent', 'stricken' and 'dying'.

8 VII. Conclusion

Aime Cesaire is much more radical than Chinua Achebe. His approach is more direct and forceful. His personal life is the life more of an intellectual revolutionary than a litterateur. Achebe's position is more distinguished in his academic arena. However, revolutionary spirits can be manifested in many ways. The rebellious zeal of Cesaire and Achebe is same but their way of expressing it is somewhat different in manner. One shows the zeal directly in the manner of poetic speech of a revolutionary leader, the other expresses it through characters, setting etc. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* reflects those colonial issues, along with others, that are repeatedly claimed by Cesaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*.

He could neither marry nor be married by the freeborn. 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-long, tangled and dirty hair. A razor was taboo to him. An osu could not attend an assembly of the free-born, and they, in turn, could not shelter under his roof. He could not take any of the four titles of the clan, and when he died he was buried by his kind in the Evil Forest." (P.111)

-
- 237 [African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies] , <[http://www.umes.edu/assets/0/22/7883/](http://www.umes.edu/assets/0/22/7883/ed29161b-c310-44f6-9e4b-e11246babcb7.pdf)
 238 [ed29161b-c310-44f6-9e4b-e11246babcb7.pdf](http://www.umes.edu/assets/0/22/7883/ed29161b-c310-44f6-9e4b-e11246babcb7.pdf)> *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies*
 239 6 p. .
- 240 [Achebe ()] Chinua Achebe . *Things Fall Apart*. Heinemann: Johannesburg, 1996.
- 241 [Cesaire ()] Aime Cesaire . *Discourse on Colonialism*. Aakar Books: Delhi, 2010.
- 242 [Aggarwal ()] 'Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart: Colonialism Versus Tradition'. Ruchee Aggarwal .
 243 from<<http://www.theglobaljournals.com/ijar/file.php?val=MTI5Ng==>> *Indian Journal of*
 244 *Applied Research* 2013. 3 (4) p. .
- 245 [Sentinaro and Chandra ()] 'Culture as Reflected in Achebe's Works and Ao Naga Literature'. I Sentinaro , N D
 246 R Chandra . <<http://www.inflibnet.ac.in/ojs/index.php/JLCMS/article/viewFile/43/41>>
 247 *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 2009. 1 (2) p. .
- 248 [Kortenaar and Ten (ed.) ()] *How the Centre is Made to Hold in Things Fall Apart*, Neil Kortenaar , Ten .
 249 Postcolonial Literatures. Ed. Michael Parker and Roger Starkey. Macmillan: London (ed.) 1995.
- 250 [Onyeozili et al. ()] Emmanuel C Onyeozili , Ebbe , N I Obi . *Social Control in Precolonial Igboland of Nigeria*,
 251 2012.
- 252 [Booker ()] *The Chinua Achebe Encyclopedia*, Keith Booker . <[http://books.google.com.bd/books/](http://books.google.com.bd/books/about/The_Chinua_Achebe_Encyclopedia.html?id=762j0oGfvFMC&redir_esc=y)
 253 [about/The_Chinua_Achebe_Encyclopedia.html?id=762j0oGfvFMC&redir_esc=y](http://books.google.com.bd/books/about/The_Chinua_Achebe_Encyclopedia.html?id=762j0oGfvFMC&redir_esc=y)> 2003. Green-
 254 wood Publishing Group: Connecticut. Google Books. Online.