

# Parallel Presentation of Positive and Negative Sides of Igbo Culture in Things Fall Apart

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## Abstract

Chinua Achebe's magnum opus *Things Fall Apart* reflects authentic presentation of the Igbo society. Various social, political, economic, religious, psychological and personal issues of the Igbo people have been put forward by the author in this ethnographic novel. Achebe has depicted these issues from the perspective of both an observer and a critic. The ethnographic depiction of the Igbo life indicates that Chinua Achebe has tried to maintain his objective stance in the novel. He is not biased at all. It is evident in his contrastive presentation of the culture and beliefs of the Igbo; in one hand, he presents the constructive and rational side of the Igbo, on the other hand, he highlights their follies and irrational beliefs too. Achebe as an original Igbo expectedly presents the riches and potentialities of the Igbo society. But at the same time he is not uncritical of the limitations of his society where he belongs to. The present study has dealt with Achebe's audacious attempt to present the limitations and follies of Igbo life in *Things Fall Apart*.

**Index terms**— igbo, objectivity, parallel, duality, multiple voices etc.

## 1 I. Introduction

Chinua Achebe (1930–2013) is a Nigerian novelist, poet, short-story writer, critical thinker and essayist, and one of the leading intellectual figures in the contemporary pan-African region, as well as the whole world. He is one of the most original literary artists writing in English. Achebe is well known all over the world for having played a germinal role in the founding and developing of African literature. *Things Fall Apart* is his first novel which "shatters the stereotypical European portraits about the native Africans" (Alam 105). Since the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Chinua Achebe has been credited with being the key progenitor of an African literary tradition.

Though Achebe belongs to Igbo culture and tradition, he has not exaggerated the pictures of Igboland in *Things Fall Apart*. He describes both positive and negative aspects of the Igbo people and provides the pictures of society, religion, politics, economy etc. without any attempt to romanticize or sentimentalize them (Nnoromele 147). Whittaker and Msiska rightly observe that the novel ends with an elegiac tone but Achebe is not uncritical of Igbo culture that he both celebrates and mourns (15). This attitude helps make the credibility of his being objective in the novel.

## 2 II. Different Facets of Showing

Oppositions in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe shows that good in the Igbo is not their exclusive identity, rather, bad is not alien to them. There are people who are wicked and try to do harm to others. In the market of Umuike there are thieves who "can steal your cloth from off your waist". Obierika warns Nwankwo against those thieves while selling a goat for the feast in his daughter's marriage. He tells a story that there was once a man who went to

## 2 II. DIFFERENT FACETS OF SHOWING

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sell a goat at the market. He led it on a thick rope which he tied round his wrist. But after a while he looked back and saw that what he led at the end of the tether was not a goat but a heavy log of wood. (80). This simple story tells us a lot. It signifies that Achebe does not partially show us that the Igbo are free from all kinds of vices. Rather, his project is to expose the reality that as human beings the Igbo have merits as well as shortcomings.

Kortenaar asserts that the Igbo's belief in *iba*, a spiritual disorder, is made doubtable by Achebe when we see a reference to a mosquito buzzing in the ear of Oknokwo in the same chapter which, "by making mosquito and *iba* contiguous" may make Achebe and his reader know that Ezinma's fever (*iba*) would be diagnosed as malaria (34). The Igbo strongly believe in the spiritual significance of *iba*. But ironically Achebe uses the mosquito as the collocation of *iba*, and intentionally attempts to weaken the Igbo's belief that *iba* is linked with the world beyond our day to day experience. It is because Achebe knows, as Sengupta says, that African societies have their own contradictions and spiritual crises before the colonial advent. While rewriting African history he does not idealize it. His stance contrasts to the Negritude writers such as Senghor, Laye and others, whose artistic works idealize Africa. (16) Even Okonkwo, the protagonist, is not without flaws. He may represent Umuofia but he is inflicted with his own follies. He commits suicide and the seeds of his self-destruction are buried "in his desire to be the antithesis of his feminine father" (Strong-Leek 29). Strong-Leek's comment is considerable. Okonkwo always tries to be opposite to his father. Even as a little boy he resented his father's failure and weakness. He is possessed by the fears of his father's contemptible life and shameful death. But Igbo sense of morality does not allow it. That's why Okonkwo is a contradictory character-in one hand, he is the representative figure of Umuofia, and on the other hand, he hates his father. Umuofia is disciplined but Okonkwo is undisciplined. Umuofia is afraid of supernatural power i.e., gods. But Okonkwo is not afraid of the gods. He breaks the Week of Peace intentionally and makes Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddesses, angry. He fears the anger of the priest. But the fear does not make him a religious person rather it makes him go against the rules of religion (Owoyemi 178). Perhaps, this is the reason why Okonkwo maintains that in the novel Okonkwo is both challenger and carrier of chaos (??6).

An additional noteworthy occasion in the novel is unmasking *egwugwu* by an *osu*. The *egwugwu* are masked spirits of the ancestors of the Igbo and revered highly. Unmasking an *egwugwu* is a dangerous offence. A converted Christian, originally an outcaste or *osu*, commits this offence and thus the real man behind the mask is discovered. This incident of unmasking an *egwugwu* is a hit upon Igbo spiritual belief. Igbo society is democratic and *Things Fall Apart* supports it. But Igbo society is not a classless society; there are underprivileged or subaltern classes in that society. There is the *Osu* class which is a dehumanized group in Igboland. The *Osu* are denied their social and cultural rights. *Osu* caste system is an impediment to social progress. It has become a culture in Igboland. Culture is the important factor in social progress. If discrimination continues no social progress is possible. Gradually the society collapses. (Dike 2002).

Ezeala (4) expresses the same view that the *Osu* caste system is "a cancer of bone marrow, an Igbo endemic disease?" (Cited in Nwagbara et al 142). In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe shows the *osu* caste system as one of the obstacles to social unity and advance. Through the *osu* system Achebe exposes both social unity and fragmentation in Igboland. He is not misleading in this respect. He does not hesitate to unearth the social hole, the *osu* caste, that is a silent curse for the Igbo.

The novel suggests that the discriminatory *osu* caste system is obviously a social hole where the Igbo themselves fall into. It is the *osu* who are the first to be converted to Christianity. This makes the missionaries confident. Achebe wants to tell us that since the *osu* have long been remained underprivileged, deprived of basic human rights and value, and since they now see an opportunity of their fullest human recognition by the missionaries, they avail themselves of the opportunity. They are not responsible for their transformation that brings about disaster in Igboland; it is the eye of social inequality and blindness that is responsible. The *osu* find an outlet of their long repressed emotions in Christianity. E. Palmer (58) accurately holds up this view and says, "The secret of the new faith's success is precisely that it offers a refuge to all those whom the clan? regard as outcasts" (cited in Owoyemi 180). In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe considers that negative elements of Igbo culture are equally responsible for the destruction of the Igbo world. "The seeds of the decay are inbuilt. The colonizers just fastened the action." (Aggarwal 221) Achebe opines that the concept of duality occupies the central place in Igbo thinking. There is an Igbo proverb that whenever something stands, something else will stand beside it. Nothing is absolute. "I am the truth, the way, and the life" would be considered blasphemous or simply absurd. (133). Being an indisputably Igbo proverb it carries within it the content that there is no fixed point in Igbo ethics. There is always duality.

Duality is a very significant issue in *Things Fall Apart*. The text produces multiple voices. Achebe cited in ?entinaro and Chandra 192). "Double view of the Igbo society of Umuofia" as presented in the novel is noteworthy here.

We can consider here Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia. According to Bakhtin the nature of language is multi-layered, which he called heteroglossia. He maintains that the power of the novel originates in the coexistence of, and conflict between, different types of speech: the speech of characters, the speech of narrators, and even the speech of the author. Any language, in Bakhtin's view, stratifies into many voices. Bakhtin asserts that this diversity of voice is the defining characteristic of the novel as a genre. This is hybrid utterance where there is not only a single speaker-the author, for example-but one or more kinds of speech.

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The juxtaposition of the two different speeches brings with it a contradiction and conflict in belief systems. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heteroglossia>). Bakhtin says, Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of doublevoiced discourse. serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. (324)

Two voices, two meanings and two expressions, that means, multi-layered voices are very common in *Things Fall Apart*. By being vulnerable to collapse, authorial voice of the novel leaves nothing that can be accused of conveying subjective ideas or emotion of the author. This is very unique in the novel. Through it we can justify the point that the author is not all in all in the text, and so there is little to think about the possibility of the novel's being spoilt by subjectivity.

We can take the significance of acquiring title among the Igbo as shown in the novel into consideration. Acquiring title is highly desired by the Igbo. It has high social value. A title-holder has to maintain some regulations defined by the society. For instance, an ozo title-holder cannot climb the palm tree. Obirika has the Ozo title. So he cannot climb the palm tree according to the custom. He is tired of this restriction. We will scrutinize a dialogue between Obierika and Okonkwo about the relative significance of the ozo title in different clans: : Sometimes I wish I had not taken the ozo title? In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. (Obierika) : In those other clans you speak of, ozo is so low that every beggar takes it. ??Okonkwo) : In Abame and Aninta the title is worth less than two cowries? (Obirika) (48)

The dialogue tells a lot about the comparative worth of the ozo title among the Igbo. The ozo titleholders in Umuofia cannot climb the palm tree, but this rule is unknown to many other clans. So, this rule in Igboland is not absolute, its value is relative and depends on various contexts. Interestingly, whereas to the Umuofians taking the ozo title requires vast wealth, in many other clans even a beggar can take it and requires much less price. So, there is double view in the significance of the ozo title. The ozo title stands as highly valuable to the Umuofians, but 'something else', a much less important ozo title, is available in many other parts of Igboland. We will explain another example taken from the novel. In Obirika's daughter's marriage there occurs a discussion about settling bride-price in various clans. The discussion tells us that there is no fixed standard of good or bad, it fluctuates. It has manifold scopes in multiple contexts. No custom is absolute and complete in itself.

Therefore, we can come to the conclusion that *Things Fall Apart* echoes the Igbo concept of duality as consisted in the proverb mentioned above. In the words of Nichols, "'Things fall apart' and 'the centre cannot hold' not because the centre no longer exists, but because there are now many centers, numerous perspectives?" (9).

### 3 III. Conclusion

In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe has championed the diverse facets, both affirmative and off-putting, of the Igbo psychology in respects of the multiple but collective responses to their socio-cultural life. In his act of championing the pre-modern Igbo society he is free from romantic illusions. He leans towards the Igbo side, but with the eye of inspection and scrutiny. With the microscopic eyes he goes through the ins and outs of inspection is that he is successful in bringing to light both examined and unexamined life of the people of Igboland long before the disparaging contact of the Europeans. <sup>1</sup>

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Figure 1:

*[Note: Had Achebe been emotionally biased to the Igbo metaphysics, he might not have referred to such awkward (for the Igbo) incident in the novel. Things Fall Apart consists of "oppositional structures" (Coker and Coker 21). The Igbo try to lead a life which contains parallel structures in every sector of life, whether the life is material or spiritual. By showing two opposite structure Achebe intends to show that the real structure in Igbo life does not consist of anything absolute, rather, it has contradictions too. For instance, Ezinma takes after her mother, Ekwefi. She grows up in her father's exile and becomes one of the most beautiful girls in Mbanta and is called Crystal of Beauty, as her mother was called in her youth (122). That means the mother and the daughter share parallel relationship-the daughter is equal to the mother. But between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye there is no such parallel relationship.]*

Figure 2:

Figure 3:

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