
CHINUA ACHEBE'S SOCIETY OF UMUOFIA - A STUDY

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Abstract: Africa has been termed as the Dark Continent. This tag was attached to the continent after the arrival of the British and the other European adventures in Africa. The whites arrived in Africa with intentions of spreading Christianity, expanding trade and empire building. These were the aims with which Africa was colonized by the European Imperial powers, partly by the French and partly by the English. African Literature is a significant part of the Twentieth Century World Literature. Writers of Africa have made a fruitful use of the European languages and their traditional literary forms in order to voice their emotional turmoil and culture shock. According to Achebe the role of a novelist is also that of a teacher. The writer is in the forefront of undergoing and giving expression to human experience. His duty is to acquaint with his fellow men of the reality and the ways of rational thinking about it. *Things Fall Apart* is the first and the most cherished novel. It is also a Landmark in the history of Anglophone literature from black Africa. *Things Fall Apart* is the story of an Ibo warrior told in three parts. The Society of Umuofia comprises the Ibo Clan. It is a farming community. Basically, the Clan is spread over nine villages. Basically they work on the lines of Democracy. The authority is not centered in any one person. Yet the unity of the clan is pronounced. The community has in common their religion, code of justice, administration, and societal functions such as concerning of birth, death and marriage. Inter tribal wars, political conflicts; land disputes and important meetings are also community affairs. Cultural values and the value system, political and social set up, social customs and traditions, role of women, religious ethic, the pantheon of Gods and Goddesses, the Oracle of Hills and Caves, the Cult of Ancestor worship, the concept of Chi in the Ibo cosmology and other things are very noteworthy in the views of Chinua Achebe.

Keywords: Achebe.s Africa, African Literature, significance of *Things Fall Apart*, Ibo Warrior, Life in Umuofia, etc...

Introduction: Africa has been termed as the Dark Continent. This tag was attached to the continent after the arrival of the British and the other European adventures in Africa. Before the advent of the white man, the natives of Africa lived in an atmosphere of untouched beauty and solitude. They had their own traditions and cultural wealth. The whites arrived in Africa with intentions of spreading Christianity, expanding trade and empire building. These were the aims with which Africa was colonized by the European Imperial powers, partly by the French and partly by the English. African Literature is a significant part of the Twentieth Century World Literature. Writers of Africa have made a fruitful use of the European languages and their traditional literary forms in order to voice their emotional turmoil and culture shock. Before the African writer emerged in his entirety, the writers of England who

wrote of or about Africa based their work on the tales recounted by the Christian missionaries, adventurers and political representatives of the colonial powers. According to Achebe the role of a novelist is also that of a teacher. The writer is in the forefront of undergoing and giving expression to human experience. His duty is to acquaint with his fellow men of the reality and the ways of rational thinking about it. Achebe also felt that his duty as a writer in Africa is to awaken his people from the disable sense of self-debasement and make them see that long before the Europeans arrived in Africa they had a culture of their own and it had beauty, poetry and philosophy. As he observed "The past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors, but even more for our own education, because, as I said, the past with all its imperfections never lacked dignity".

Things Fall Apart is the first and the most cherished novel. It is also a Landmark in the history of Anglophone literature from black Africa. *Things Fall Apart* is the story of an Ibo warrior told in three parts. Part 1 is devoted to the rise and reputation of Okonkwo, the protagonist. It simultaneously focuses our attention on the aspect of Ibo culture and traditions. Part 2 is given to expose the anarchy in the Ibo culture and the advent of the white man and his civilizing mission in this side of Africa. It also exposes the way in which the Christian Missionaries exploit the rigidity of the native culture to further their interests such as spreading their religion and annexing as much as of the African peninsula as possible, into the British Empire. Further, it records the fall and the disgrace of the native clan at the instance of the white man. It shows the return of Okonkwo to his own village and the tensions within the clan surfacing. The last and the 3 part of the book uncovers the process of anarchy working into the roots of the native culture and the death of Okonkwo and the triumph of the western point of view with regard to religion and life in general.

The Society of Umuofia comprises the Ibo Clan. It is a farming community. Basically, the Clan is spread over nine villages. Basically they work on the lines of Democracy. The authority is not centered in any one person. Yet the unity of the clan is pronounced. The community has in common their religion, code of justice, administration, and societal functions such as concerning of birth, death and marriage. Inter tribal wars, political conflicts; land disputes and important meetings are also community affairs. Cultural values and the value system, political and social set up, social customs and traditions, role of women, religious ethic, the pantheon of Gods and Goddesses, the Oracle of Hills and Caves, the Cult of Ancestor worship, the concept of Chi in the Ibo cosmology and other things are very noteworthy in the views of Chinua Achebe. Among the Ibos age is respected but achievement is revered. A man who is valiant in war and industrious on his farm and successful in feeding his family all through the year is considered an achiever. Manliness and industrious way of life are regarded as male values and finer emotions such as love, charity and compassion as female values. In fact the Ibo culture respects both male and female individuals equally. Religion and religious practices are expected to be adhered to by the members of the tribe. Any defiance of these tenets is strictly dealt with by the elders of the clan. It is an important thing to be noted that the Ibo culture gives more importance to the community than to the individual and the clan is superior to the people.

As for as the political and social set up is concerned the village consisting of several hamlets is the smallest unit in the political map of the Ibo land. Each village has its own boundary. If there is a land dispute, the disputed land is won by the village that wins the tribal war. If there is conflict between villages due to deliberate or inadvertent killing then it is resolved either by war or by paying compensation as ordered by the village code of justice. Thus we find in

Things Fall Apart when a woman of Umuofia is found killed by the people of Mbaino then the matter is settled when the later agree to provide a maiden to replace the dead wife of the man concerned and in addition they also part with a young boy Ikemefuna to be sacrificed on the command of the Oracle of the Hills and Caves. The Ibo society of Umuofia has many customs and traditions that bring the people into one harmonious whole. Marriages always take place between people of different villages as in the case of Oberika's daughter. public meetings, markets, festivals and the sport of wrestling take place on the village 'Ilo' or a vast open ground. Besides, women are never treated as secondary to men. Virtues such as love, charity and compassion are also held in great difference. Among Ibos there is a saying that exemplifies a woman's superiority, it is "Mother is supreme" when Okonkwo is banished from Umuofia for having committed the crime of killing a clansman, he takes shelter with his mother's people. His uncle Uchendu tells him that a mother's place in their culture is irreplaceable. He says, "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good, and life is sweet. But when there is a sorrow and bitterness, he finds refuge in the motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there, and that is why we say that Mother is supreme".

The religious ethic of the Ibo society draws the attention of the readers. It is true to say that any society becomes an organic unit mainly due to the control exerted by its religion. In any age and any culture religion plays a vital role in the continued existence of its race. It is with the help of religion that the life of a particular people flows smoothly and harmoniously. Accordingly, the religion of the Ibo society of Umuofia is no different in this age-old, time tested aspect. There are three main divisions of the Ibo religious ethic, namely, the pantheon of gods and goddesses, the Oracle of Hills and Caves and the Cult of ancestor worship. Crime is divided into two kinds, male and female inadvertently committed crimes are regarded as the female kind. There are retributory measures for every crime that desecrates the Earth goddess. If a kinsman is killed inadvertently banishment and exile are the punishment meted out to the guilty as in Okonkwo's case. If there were a crime deliberately committed then the punishment would be even more severe. For example, when Okonkwo commits suicide, his body is considered unholy and that the clansmen are prohibited to touch his mortal remains because death by suicide is a sin against **Ani** the Earth Goddess. Hence, strangers perform his last rites. The Oracles of Hills and Caves play a vital role in the life of Ibos. For every calamity that befalls or about to strike the clan or the individuals, the Oracle is like an advisory body. It is presided over by a deity called **Agbala**. A Priestess is in-charge of this deity. And one more important element of Ibo religious ethic is the Cult of Ancestor worship. The spirits of ancestors are closely associated with Earth Goddess. The Ibos believe that there is a very narrow dividing line between the living and the dead. They believe in life after death and consider that sacred. That is why ancestors are equal to deities in the Ibo culture.

An important aspect of Ibo religion is the concept of *Chi*, the *Chi* is equal to personal god. According to the Ibo religious belief every individual is granted at the time of his or her birth a guardian spirit. Perhaps, it is a belief that no one is greater than the *Chi* or personal spirit. The wealth of culture is stored in the folklore of that particular race. As far as Achebe's depiction of the native society of the Ibo land is concerned, folklore, this is a rich inheritance of the oral literature. Among the Ibos the wrestler story is of the great value. One of the most important ceremonies for the manly race of Ibos is title-taking ceremony. It is an honour and a symbol of status for him. The ceremony is quite elaborate and difficult. Only a prosperous man can afford it. He should be a man of achievement and material prosperity. And at the same time community feasts are an important part of the Ibo society. The most important of all feasts is the New Yam feast. The Ibos of Umuofia observe the "Week of Peace" very strictly. During the

week of peace no one is allowed to lose temper and commit any act of violence against anyone. Okonkwo breaks the week of peace and condemned by the clansmen. For the Ibo culture, society is more important than a single individual. After a keen observation, we understand that blind beliefs, irrational customs, harsh and inhuman justice, human sacrifices, lack of tolerance, lack of proper judgment are the main reasons for things fall apart in Umuofia and also both the clansmen and the white man are equally responsible for the downfall of the culture of Umuofia.

Conclusion: Thus, Chinua Achebe has pictured the traditional village society of Africa before the colonial era. The tribal society of Umuofia has been created after a real model with a set of values and the method in which they govern clan life. There is no central authority like a king in village politics; they obey the rules set by their ancestors. The society of Umuofia believed in the existence of a supreme being, which controlled material life.

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