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**Okonkwo : A True Representative of African Culture  
in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

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Achebe is, unhesitatingly, one of the accomplished writers. His literary talent and creative instincts have been well recognized with the publication of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* which has been widely acclaimed by the natives besides rest of the world. The novel reveals the colonial dominance and impact on the lives of Africans. It concerns with the dislocation of the African society caused by impact with another way of life. Achebe has adopted the title from Yeats (1896:90) poem, *The Second Coming*:

“Things Fall Apart, the centre cannot hold.”

*Things Fall Apart*, an unsentimental novel depicts the story of life of Okonkwo, an ambitious and powerful leader of Igbo community, who believes in physical strength and courage. It seems Okonkwo is none other than the voice of Achebe. Okonkwo is perfectly successful leader with good life, large compound, nice wives, and venerated by the community. But when Okonkwo accidentally kills a clansman, he is banished from the village for seven years. But the vehicle for his downfall is his blindness to circumstances and the missionary church that brings with it the new authority of the British District Commissioner. The story is set in the 1890s, when missionaries and colonial government made its intrusion into Igbo society. In this process Okonkwo is destroyed, due to his unwillingness to change, which sees him apart from the community and he fights alone against colonialism.

Irele (1997:10) comments:

“Okonkwo represents his society in so far as the society has made the man by proposing to him certain values and lines of conduct. On the other hand, the man's personal disposition, his reaction to these social determinations stemming from his subjective perception of them, prepares his individual fate.”

Okonkwo has grown up in a community that has the individual quality of ‘manliness’ and passionate desire.

Achebe through the contrasting events shows the complex, dualistic nature of the customs and traditions of the Igbo society. The villagers are engaged in the communal activity. They enjoy marriage feast. Even there is rigid application of tribal laws and decrees of Gods that deny and violate human responses. Achebe evaluates the action and tragic lives of the central characters. Throughout the novel we are compelled to extend our empathy for Okonkwo which despite the fact, that he commits some inhuman acts i.e., he participates in killing the innocent boy with Obierika. Even he denies his son, Nwoye. In another situation he castigates his loving daughter, Ezinma. He struggles courageously to save her from Iba, he tries to protect her from harm at the hands of Chielo, priestess of Agbala.

Success is a passion for Okonkwo. So Okonkwo is chased by the desire of becoming successful, powerful and rich. Though his conscience is haunted by the fear of failure, he remains firm and active in his conviction. Okonkwo wishes to be a champion of the community for which he rejects the compromise and flexibility, in turn he rejects the values of the society. Okonkwo appears to be violent throughout his life. He sticks to his values. His personality is of uncompromising nature. When the society does not respond to his stiff nature, then Okonkwo realizes his loneliness. His sense of isolation

does not pinch his conscience. Okonkwo's wilderness, violent nature and uncompromising behavior are such that these three qualities shut the doors of society to him wherein he is pushed outside his society. Thought, he is an outcaste from the society, he never bends to any situation and one cannot witness any transformation in his stiff nature. Finding no place in the new Umuofia, disgusted Okonkwo ends his life in violence. Thus Okonkwo becomes a victim of the colonizers. The brutal laws of the white missionaries target and victimize an innocent like Okonkwo.

Rev. Smith glances at things as black and white. He symbolizes viciousness, brutality and violence. As a colonizer, he wishes to eliminate, eventually, destroy the traditional practices of the village people. He desires them to follow his footsteps whether good or bad. Certainly bad ways. He dishonours the customs of the Umuofia people. He vehemently attacks their religion. Perhaps, Rev. Smith is unaware of the fact that the soul is nourished through timeless customs and traditions. Christianity acts as a catalyst but it is not the primary cause of things falling apart, because Umuofia was already in the process of disintegration and reformation.

*Things Fall Apart* pictures the Igbo society as it was at the end of the nineteenth century. The lives of the community and an individual are merged into significance and order through its rituals. The arrival of the ancestral spirit or Egwugwu is a typical example to express the fears and hopes of the villagers by their rituals.

The expression in gestures, the formal greetings are in no sense merely part of the African local colour. The meetings of the clan and the debates show their fears and hopes in the communal decisions. The novel is narrated in the third person, but there is no suggestion of an omniscient observer scrutinizing and analyzing the customs and habits of this Igbo community.

Achebe shows perfect craftsmanship in technique and diction in his novels. *Things Fall Apart*, which is the first novel by him beautifully pictures the Igbo society. Most of the critics have aired their comments upon the usage of idioms and proverbs that represent the Igbo society in the present text. *Things Fall Apart* depicts the agricultural and hunting society. The text is filled with a series of similes. The simile of the Kite and her chick explains the folktale of Mother Kite and her daughter that is told by Uchendu in Part-II. The narration in the text is in a collective voice through which the artist speaks for his society. Achebe presents Okonkwo in the very beginning as a robust young man:

“Okonkwo was known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth.” Achebe (1965:01).

The above passage illustrates the adventurous, courageous, heroic qualities and dashing nature of Okonkwo, besides his wrestler's spirit. At the same time, the characteristic of the narrative voice by Achebe is also manifested in the above passage. Okonkwo is addicted to the traditional and social values. He also believes in the notion that the character is shaped through understanding of one's culture and discipline. He is not like the young men of those days.

Achebe's psychological narration of Okonkwo is quite apt. Okonkwo is gripped with his own shadow of fear complex. It appears mysterious, as to why he hates what his father loved. Here Achebe has befittingly brought in the comparison of two contradictory elements of love and hate.

Achebe has presented obviously this growing successful vision of Okonkwo without any tinge of suspicion because it is unwanted. Okonkwo's inflexible that brings him success in a society is remarkable for its flexibility. Okonkwo reacts against his father's unmanliness. He simplifies this pattern and insists that his sons share his ideas such as masculine aggression and virility. Thus Okonkwo motivates the boys to be in his circle, and he narrates them folktales related to masculinity, violence and bloodshed. Nwoye realizes that it is fundamental right to be masculine of his tribe and violent, but he bends towards the

stories that his mother uses to tell. It seems ambiguous that Nwoye prefers narrative tales of his mother, rather than that of his father. Here, Achebe favours 'womanly' perception perhaps which is unnoticed by Okonkwo. Wherein Achebe tries to balance dominance of 'manly' and 'womanly' attitudes though appears 'manly' superior. David Carroll (1990:41) on Okonkwo's temperament comments:

“Okonkwo has created a false contradiction between strength and gentleness, and the consequences of this over simplification are evident not only in his own tragedy but also in the life of his son Nwoye.”

Achebe draws out the inner conflict and suffering of Okonkwo and he tries to accommodate with the villagers. It is evident that the equilibrium and adjustments are hidden in the nature of village i.e. Umuofia. A radical contradiction is drawn between human and divine values, and the contradiction is institutionalized in the role of paying of the tribal officials.

Okonkwo is in exile for seven years in Mbanta, his mother's kinsmen village. He is received by his mother's younger brother, Uchendu. He watches and criticizes the change of events both here and at home in Umuofia. Uchendu questions Okonkwo on the role of the mother in the clan as to why is a woman brought home to be buried with her kinsmen? Why is Okonkwo exiled to his mother's village after being banished from his own home? Okonkwo is unable to answer to all these questions. Uchendu seeks to strike the balance by reminding him of the maternal virtues within the family, whereas, Okonkwo lives on male dominated values.

The end of the book symbolizes the replacement of the Igbo culture by English culture, and the Igbo language by the English language. The Igbo characters are at the centre of the novel and the language is closely related to the Igbo characters. It describes the narrator as a spokesperson of the Igbo community. Okonkwo refuses to accept the colonial influence. He forbids any religious system to encroach upon his territory and protests to lay its roots in his territory.

Okonkwo could fight with the colonial forces because: “Okonkwo was not a man of thought but of action. But in absence of work, talking was the next best.” (71).

At the beginning of the novel, Igbo language dominates, but as the novel progresses the language is affected by colonial language. At the close of the novel the intensity of the colonial impact immeasurably grows. The colonials are indifferent and ignorant to the Igbo customs: “How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?” (183). Asks Obierika.

Okonkwo and the elders were arrested and accused of the charge of burning of Mr. Smith's Church. The District Commissioner lectures them while “the six men remained sullen and silent... Even when the men were left along they found no words to speak to one another.” The voices of young men are not heard in the villages. Even everyone in Okonkwo's compound speaks in low voice. Achebe's novel reveals the miseries of he colonized. Through Okonkwo the novel displays the attitude of the people of Igbo society towards European imperialism.

In the novel, through the protagonist, Okonkwo and other characters Achebe has clearly presented the picture of the Igbo society and how the people of Igbo society are averse to embrace any other religion and vehemently protest the British Imperialism in this land.

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