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Resisting Change through Individual Heroism – Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Reflecting the Multidimensional Life of African Social Groups

Chinua Achebe's works reflect the multidimensional life of African social groups, variously called tribal groups, living in Africa. His well-known novel *Things Fall Apart* presents a sincere record of the Igbo society. Achebe presents their life in several dimensions, their harvest, courtship, marriage, death, faith based belief, festivals, the elder's anxiety to protect the unity of the social group through group-based native judicial processes, etc.

Indian Writers and Chinua Achebe

In some ways, *Things Fall Apart* is like reading a Tamil novel written by a combination of writers like Pudumai Piththan, Jayakanthan, Chidambara Raghunathan, Ka. Naa. Subramanian and others, who had a flair for describing social customs, while pointing out how changes transform the social fabric. Chinua Achebe captures the spirit of the African society during the transitional period. He delineates the encounter between the tribal Igbo culture and the materialism-oriented western culture.

Okonkwo: the Hero, His Idealism and His Contempt

Okonkwo, the protagonist of the novel, is a representative voice of the native African tribal culture. The values and the ideas of African culture are presented elaborately and realistically. Okonkwo, a popular man in the village of Umuofia is much celebrated and admired for his manly prowess and heroism. His defeat of Amalinze, 'the cat' places him high on the pedestal of glory. He stands as an embodiment of courage and success, which happens to be the highest ideal of Igbo culture. "He has no patience with unsuccessful men. He had no patience with his father" (6) Okonkwo's father, Unoka, who is lazy and a miserable failure, provides a sharp contrast to him." He was, in fact, a coward and could not bear the sight of blood" (6). Thus there prevails a conspicuous contrast between Okonkwo and his father.

Achebe portrays Okonkwo as some one who hates "everything that his father Unoka loved." A similar contrast is also shown between Okonkwo and his son Nwoye who is portrayed as cowardly, lazy and delicate in nature. Thus both father and son of Okonkwo provide a good contrast to highlight Okonkwo heroism. Is this something an accident? The contrast is built up to bring out the resurgent generation but this generation has to give way to something else, with less accent on individual and tribal heroism and values.

The novel brings to limelight the life style of Umuofia village, their culture, their tradition, their sentiments, superstitious beliefs, feelings and emotions, happiness and agony and the intensity of the throbbing pain of the society as well as the individuals.

Realistic Portrayal of Life and Achebe's Own Caustic Judgment

Achebe's grand success lies in the realistic portrayal of both rational and irrational practices of Igbo society. The novel at times sounds like that Achebe has no hesitations in writing off the African civilization as irrational and superstition-ridden and unfit to be preserved and hence can be eradicated.

Indian writers of fiction in Tamil, however, do not go to this extent. For Indians, whether they are "progressive" or "conservative" writers, there seems to be something good and noble in many practices of the society, but their anger is always at the social institutions. Individual beliefs and superstitions seem to be portrayed with sympathy for the individuals who are portrayed to be in this "trap" because of social practices and institutions.

Description of the Darker Sides of the Civilization

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is replete with descriptions of the superstitions rampant in Umuofia. Twin children, who are regarded as unfit to be reared are mercilessly abandoned in the Evil Forest. No effort is taken to cure leprosy, but the afflicted persons are packed off to Evil Forest. The act of mutilating the handicapped child to prevent its rebirth, the worship of python as sacred god, the blind belief of following the stupid decisions of oracle as law, the act of savage treatment of women, marrying women as a sign prestige and prosperity are some of the barbarous practices discussed elaborately in the novel.

Social Reformation and Revolutionary Literature

Most of these seem to come close to our own Indian context, but somehow such episodes do not get pointed attention in the writings of most of the Tamil writers. Social reformation themes became more focused and controversial as part of the political processes among the Tamils through the Dravidian Movement. Social reformers such as Periyar E.V.R. and C. N. Annadurai led this movement. But such reformatory zeal was not shared in the writings of most of the Tamil novelists. They went in for social adjustments in changing times, carefully avoiding the gory details that could have formed part of their stories. Descriptions of social nuances and traditions with some appreciation for the values they represent became the trend.

Advocate of Success and Heroism

Okonkwo, who is an advocate of success and heroism, is forced by circumstances to yield to such superstitious practices of Igbo society. When the oracle of the Hills and Caves demanded to kill Ikemefuna, Okonkwo is caught in dilemma between affection and cruel duty. He is forced to kill Ikemefuna much against his wish, but only to overcome his fear of failure and cowardice. "Okonkwo drew his machet and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak." (55)

Okonkwo is short tempered and beats his wives for no reason. He is not demonstrative in his expressions of love and affection for his wives, children, kinsmen or friends as his clan believes in the view that demonstration of delicate feeling is a sign of weakness.

“Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it is the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness, the only thing worth demonstrating was strength” (26).

Portraying the Positive and Desirable Sides of a Civilization – Resistance and Reconciliation

Achebe also focuses on some of the desirable aspects of the Umuofia society. In Umuofio, both marriages and funerals are held with intense fervor. Such incidents bring together all the villagers proclaiming the concept of unity and oneness. This also stands as a fine proof of the bond of love and concern that bind them together. Another appreciable quality of Igbo tribal life is the hardworking nature and the readiness for hard manual labor. In spite of all toughness, the emotional loving nature of man, which Okonkwo suppresses, comes to surface, when he is forced into exile after accidentally killing Ezeudu’s son at the latter’s burial. He feels heavy by the unexpected exile, but has no choice and had to accept the punishment as a part of expiation of his sin. He leads the exilic life in his motherland – Mbanta with a sense of resignation. After the completion of seven years in exile, he returns to Umuofio. He stands helpless to notice the changes that have come over in Umuofio.

Obierika rightly comments: “The white man is clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We are amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart.....” (160)

Okonkwo grieved, he mourned for his clan, which he saw breaking up and falling apart. At last in frustration, he kills the District Commissioner’s court messenger and commits suicide. This certainly is a powerful metaphor as well. The District Commissioner represents a position of authority in the westernized administration. Okonkwo could not kill the District Commissioner, who is well protected, but he could vent his anger through the killing of his messenger. His death is reported as, “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofio you drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog.....”

Things Fall Apart and End in Tragedy for a Lonely Hero

Things Fall Apart is thus, the story of Okonkwo’s resistance to the incoming culture and his brave attempt to retain his degrading Igbo tradition and society.

As a staunch believer in personal heroism, death is preferable to dishonor for him. The novel is portrays the life style and traditional values of Igbo clan. Apt to the title *Things Fall Apart*, which Chinua Achebe has taken from W.B.Yates’ poem, **The Second Coming**, the novel reflects the mode and life style of the tribal group and also gives a clear picture of the decay and decline of old African tribal clan under the influence of western culture. J. M. Waghmare rightly states:

When the centre of culture or society cannot hold, all, things fall apart. Here the religious faith of African tribes is the centre of their culture and civilization and history. It holds together their ways and values of life. It is as the centre of their

mores, customs and beliefs. The centre was enduring till the advent of the Whiteman with his religion, culture and civilization. A collision between the two conflicting ways and values of life was inevitable. The collision was indeed most catastrophic and tragic. Chinua Achebe has portrayed it very skillfully and imaginatively.

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