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LOST IDENTITY- A MAJOR POST COLONIAL THEME

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to defining Postcolonial literature the instant thought which comes to our mind is that it addresses the various crisis and consequences of the decolonization of a country or of a nation. The purpose of this paper is to throw light on one of the major theme taken by the Post colonial authors-Lost Identity. Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart made a prominent mark in describing this theme. This paper involves discovering how the main protagonist loses his identity after a series of events in the novel, Things Fall Apart. The author has revealed how Okonkwo, the main character, faces a loss of identity. The paper here proposes to study how people live in a continent before colonial invasion. They lived in a complex, diverse and fruitful relationship with the African environment but as colonization comes in action, all hell breaks loose. The main character suffers a gradual loss in his honor, male power and sense of duty.

This paper attempts a reading of Things Fall Apart from a point where it shows how the simple humans behave when they suffer a crisis in identity. It also intends to indicate the height of the damage in the relationship among the people of the Igbo society. The author attempts to analyze the different cultural elements such as language and religion in Igbo society and how it changes because of the colonizers. It indicates how the simple villagers cannot escape the pervasiveness of colonialists' and finally the Umofians with all their complexity and integrity fall down. The paper goes through the Igbo society before and during the coming of the colonizers, the Europeans and represent how they fall apart.

Keywords- identity, colonizers, society, change

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The very first thing which comes to your mind after reading the novel "Things Fall Apart" is that the Igbo people have created a world around themselves which holds ancestral believes and hierarchy. They have a democratic government which consists of different councils, Council of Elders, Council of Masquerades, the Oracles and they even link up people and gods with their Chief Priests. They have a set of laws, rules and regulations that are mandatory for everyone. Those who don't follow these rules or anyhow break the laws are subjected to severe punishments. Their wealth status is measured by the number of wives, children and, most

importantly, yams. Yams in Igbo society represent power where as in Okonkwo's word it means manliness. Any one "who could feed his family on yams from one harvest to another was great man indeed" (TFA 23). Religion constitutes an important role in the Igbo society. There are a number of rules and traditions which they follow because they are ascribed in their religion. Oracle is the term given to the wishes of the gods which is communicated through Diviners. They are bound to comply them.

The dominance of the male characters emerges within the Igbo community where power is portrayed at the physical level as well as on the basis of social and interactive level. People who are lazy are considered as an "agbala" meaning a woman in Igbo. Okonkwo's father has vividly represented this idea which is also the reason why Okonkwo illustrates himself as a violent man who acts without thinking. He is short tempered and rules his family with fear. Okonkwo associates his father with a weak feeble attitude and with weakness he associates the other gender. He considers this as femininity. Okonkwo achieved fame after he defeated Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match. He brought honour and respect to his village because until this match, Amalinze had not been defeated by any one for seven years. This is the very first incident which we read regarding Okonkwo's physical strength and capability.

We are introduced to a structure of authority on the basis of the society level which comprises of a number of advantages given to the individual by the clan. Ogbuefi Ezeudu can be taken as an example her who "had been a great and fearless warrior in his time, and was now accorded a great respect in all the clan." (TFA, p.57). The term "positive male power" is employed as an opposite term to the "coercive physical power". These perceptions are like values established by the elders of the clan as the basic foundation in Umuofia village in order to maintain their ancestral beliefs and hierarchy. When we go through this novel, we can notice a very remarkable direct link between male supremacy and reputation. Adequately, the structural dominance granted on the basis of the villager's intellect and also by certain principles drawn by the clan. A reputed status thus becomes the main focus, like an axis around which other ancestral believes and hierarchy move. The reputation is highlighted to such an extent in the organized Umuofia system that it becomes the basic requirement to inherit leadership in the clan. Accordingly these inherit leaders display a tremendous sense of duty because they don't want themselves to be seen as a person with downfalls. In fact they are the ones who have to promote the ancestral beliefs and take care of the values which maintains order and hierarchy in the village clan. In the same way, if any man who is not able to achieve power and reputation also loses the opportunity to be called as the true clan member.

Subsequently, my concern lies in showing how such male dominance, powerful status and responsibility becomes the reason of the breakdown of Okonkwo and other characters' identity in this novel.

The setting of Things Fall Apart is in Igboland approaching the end of the nineteenth century. Various themes are projected in this novel among which male supremacy, honor and reputation, sense of responsibility, clash of different cultures, beliefs carried on from ancestors and the hierarchy trend can be mentioned. The novel explains the hustle and bustle caused by coming of the Europeans. Their arrival brought in a number of different things, a different religion, a new way of living life and an entirely different way of thinking towards every little bit in life. This divides the novel in different parts. When the reader starts reading the novel he is introduced to a well integrated structure of Umuofia, with a proper running political organization and kinship system. The reader also witnesses the male power of the main protagonist, Okonkwo who is described as a brave, fearless champion whose name and fame is spread across the whole Igboland:

"Okonkwo was well 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". (TFA, pg.3)

Okonkwo's reputation is even more emphasized by the narrator further gives the physical description that declares a lot about his personality and explains the reader about the capabilities of the central figure:

That was many years ago, twenty years or more, and during this time Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. He was tall and huge, and his bushy eyebrows and wide nose gave

him a very severe look. He breathed heavily, and it was said that, when he slept, his wives and children in their houses could hear him breathe. When he walked, his heels hardly touched the ground and he seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often. He had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough; he would use his fists. He had no patience with unsuccessful men. He had had no patience with his father. (TFA, pg.3-4)

This description makes the reader create a conclusion that Okonkwo has gained self-satisfaction as far as his authority as a male and his reputation is concerned. As reported by Ada Uzoamaka Azado: “: “In the Umuofia community of Things Fall Apart, Igbo men are constrained to achieve and flaunt [male superiority], in order to be seen and respected.” (EP, pg.50) The civilization of Nigeria as described by Achebe in this novel is symbolized by patriarchy which very well manifests in the whole novel. Even though the concept of Nneka, which means “Mother is Supreme” which reminds that “the most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother”, still women are often marginalized and only measured as properties of men: “In domestic terms, women are reckon as part of a man’s acquisitions. As wives, women come in multiple numbers, sandwiched between yam barns and titles.” Thus, women are considered in the Umuofia territory as part of the various principles to be associated to manhood. The narrator throws light on the way women are secluded from the social hierarchy: “It was clear from the way the crowd stood or sat that the ceremony was for men.” (TFA, pg.87). Actually this situation does not prevail only in Umuofia only. Literally, in African culture male are considered superior where as women are looked down and not next to the male sex.

The reader is not surprised to read Okonkwo’s father description contradicting his own personality. His father, Unoka is defined as lethargic and a reckless drunkard:

Unoka, for that was his father’s name, had died ten years ago. In his day he was a lazy and improvident and was quite incapable of thinking about tomorrow. If any money came his way, and it seldom did, he immediately bought gourds of palm-wine, called round his neighbors and made merry. He always said that whenever he saw a dead man’s mouth he saw the folly of not eating what one had in one’s lifetime. Unoka was, of course, a debtor, and he owed every neighbor some money, from a few cowries to quite substantial amounts. (TFA, pg.4)

Unoka’s irresponsible behavior is portrayed through his inability to handle properly the money he owns. His only interest is to drink palm wine and enjoy with his friends. He is illustrated as a man who has not achieved anything, as an *agbala* in Igbo. He is often subjected to mockery because he has not lived like a true Umuofian male, who lives life on the basis of the standards set for men by the ancestors:

Unoka, the grown-up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat. People laughed at him because he was a loafer, and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. /.../ Unoka was never happy when it came to wars. He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of blood. And so he changed the subject and talked about music, and his face beamed. (TFA, pg.5-6)

This weak image of Unoka is not drawn unintentionally in fact it is a method Achebe used to characterize male supremacy in the Igbo society as well as to represent the perception regarding men who face failures. Hence, one perceives that male supremacy throughout the novel is closely associated with their hunt for identity. This is the reason behind Okonkwo’s continuous attempts to display himself as a courageous warrior which is often threatened in novel. In a way, Okonkwo tries to elucidate himself with a forged image of a real man in his patriarchal community where a real man is full of authority.

Okonkwo emerges, first, as an outstanding strong man who has achieved the self-contentment he wishes to look for. As Ifeoma Onyemelukwe explains:

[Okonkwo] is the man who was able to resolve his identity crisis in late adolescence. At age 18 he had developed self-confidence, a high self-concept, and self-esteem and had high achievement motivation

as typical of the average Igbo man. The consequence of this is his reverberating achievement and celebrity. (EP, pg.37)

Okonkwo's physical endurance is united with his maturity to present a fake powerful personality in his patriarchal society. Okonkwo shows himself as a powerful individual who thinks very low about unsuccessful men like his father, Unoka. Such men who have an image of coward individuals are nothing more than agbala i.e. Igbo word for women.

Okonkwo's glory decline after the accidental murder of a small boy. He is no more regarded as the figure of a supreme powerful man only because a young boy is inadvertently killed by a bullet from his gun. Furthermore, the laws customary to the Igbo society claims that anyone who commits the crime of taking someone's life should be banished to his motherland. This, associated with Okonkwo's macho personality emphasizes the guilt shed on him.

"Overnight, great Okonkwo, the great warrior, the great warrior, the great wrestler, one of the most outstanding achievers of his time, most respected and revered, loses all he has labored to achieve just in the twinkling of an eye. His hope or remaining "one of the lords of the clan," is shattered.

His flight to Mbanta implies starting life afresh, from the scratch. It means loss of self-esteem, peace, happiness. His ego is obviously punctured. His fame transforms into shame. His identity crumbles. Crises and conflict set in again". (EP, pg.41-42)

It is visible that the situation into which Okonkwo finds himself turns out to be paradoxical because, regardless of the patriarchal trend, he is still banished to his mother's village. We can find this as a device Achebe uses to reconstruct the image of the African women. Here Achebe is trying to reshape the lost identity by assigning her an extremely important role i.e. of a shelter for man. In this regard the author wants to celebrate the "Mother as a Supreme Being", a concept which is frequently seen in Achebe's writings.

Apparently, Okonkwo's return to his mother's homeland proves to be an important incident as it secures him from the influences of the Europeans. This is the point when Okonkwo comes face to face with his 'depersonalization' in exile. This change in identity is first noticed by his uncle who states:

"Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or "Mother is Supreme?" We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland". (TFA, pg.133)

The speaker underlines Okonkwo's acquaintance with his loss of identity. . "[He] knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan." (TFA, pg.171) Anyhow, his return in the following lines stress upon his honor and sense of responsibility:

He was determined that his return should be marked by his people. He would return with a flourish, and regain the seven wasted years. /.../ Even in his first year in exile he had begun to plan his return. (TFA, pg.171)

One might wonder if the shift that has occurred in his society would give him permission to achieve his reintegration without troubles. However, talking about Okonkwo as portrayed in the early stages of the novel, one may think that his return would bring back the ancestral beliefs and hierarchy within Umuofia. On the other hand the imbrications of theories like reputation, male power, and the sense of responsibility are the ones which constitute in a common focus characterized by brutal behavior and also by the decline of Okonkwo's popularity and personality.

Returning to Okonkwo's reintegration within his society, he is placed in the structure of the figure above shows that his his final situation is not fortunate. Adequately, Okonkwo constitutes a blend of male power, honour and sense of responsibility. Okonkwo's irritability and eagerness to achieve success illustrates

the basic nature of his character. Thus, the violent position that hastened Okonkwo into an inevitable downfall is a product of the overlapping of male power, reputation and sense of responsibility.

The society of Umuofia is organized in such a manner that an individual must climb the social ladder if he wants to be respected in the society. Whereas, on the other hand women are set aside, or here we can say, men who are not capable of achieving manliness. As a matter of fact, Okonkwo who is not able to find some of his previous attributes is, undoubtedly excluded from the group of the honourable men. Being no longer a source of pride, he falls down as low as an agbala, like his father. Okonkwo's decline proves to be negative which results in making him extremely violent. The first case is, where at the individual level violence is used to liberate himself from the Europeans, while the second situation has as adverse effect on the whole Umuofia society. As the violence in Okonkwo's case is not limited to one person, the reparation thereafter is not controllable and thus, 'things fall apart'.

To throw light on Okonkwo's downfall, Achebe creates distances between the main character and the different changes taking place and affecting the Umuofia society. At this point the author shows an eminent role played by exile which he uses as a device to make Okonkwo safe from various changes. Now there is no confrontation between Okonkwo and his community, but it is between his cultural beliefs and the European imposed trend and culture. In fact, the situation is so that the Europeans have succeeded in convincing the Igbo people and Okonkwo is the only left who becomes as individual fighter defending the traditions of Umuofia. His achievements and disappointments rest on his ability to formulate a correct decision of the three important values that constitute to his personality: male power, reputation and sense of responsibility.

Okonkwo is the part of a society where male dominance is the centre of traditional beliefs. The patriarchy he has emulated from his ancestral traditions force him to adopt an attitude where women are considered inferior and men are regarded as the superior gender. Okonkwo is one such man of his society who becomes very popular in a very early age of eighteen. This is the reason why he wants to stay at the peak of his power and fame. Okonkwo shifts from a popular hero to a villain. This shift explains that violence is an inevitable reason of the transformation in Okonkwo which affects the whole community.

Achebe epitomizes Okonkwo's calamity as a character victim of the violence faced in the society on one hand, but also of himself on the other. The Umuofia society goes through different types of violence. The first one is brought by the Europeans colonizers which is physically imposed and it was against the two different people and their cultures. The second kind of violence is more heartbreaking and is imposed by traditions on each individual. For example, Okonkwo faces seven years banishment for having killed a Klansman; the deliberate murder of the twin children to avoid a curse that may fall upon the village; little Ikemefuna's sacrifice to Ani, the Earth goddess which was done to provide justice after the death of a member of the neighboring village.

We also find that there is individual violence which Okonkwo works out on his own personality. We first notice this specific type of conflict mentally. This was where he firmly believed in recapturing his lost identity and to accomplish this cause, he becomes so disturbed that his own violence makes him commit suicide rather than falling into captivity. However, this leads to such a condition that all his honour, reputation fame sheds off within minutes.

It is quite evident that the last few sections of the novel *Things Fall Apart* portray an Okonkwo who becomes fully aware of his downfall and who tries to recapture his lost identity and dignity. He is no more the same Okonkwo who "said yes strongly; so his chi agreed" (TFA. pg. 27). Unfortunately Okonkwo realizes a little late, his efforts to keep the little honour also prove to be of no use. Subsequently, committing suicide is forbidden: "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen." (TFA, pg. 207) Poor Okonkwo is rejected even as a dead man because his agony opposed "[their] customs" (TFA. pg 207). However, the reader gets some compassion through Obierika:

Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said ferociously: "That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove

him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog..." He could not say any more. His voice trembled and choked his words. (TFA, pg.208)

The narrator also blames the District Commissioner's men of Okonkwo's death. This is the point where Achebe condemns the negative and violent aspects of the arrival of the colonizers (Europeans) in Africa, generally and particularly too. *Things Fall Apart* can also be taken as a novel that Achebe uses to characterize the absurdity of certain traditions which have disastrous effects on the individual and also on the society. There is a call for realization which Okonkwo failed to do in the correct manner. Thus what we see in the end, his decline with a tragic end, are the final outcome of his failure.

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