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THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF COLONIALISM: A CRITICAL STUDY OF
THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

Discourse on colonialism generally results in the different opinions of the colonizer and the colonized. The upshot of such discourse shows that colonialism has divergent interpretations. For the colonizer, it is 'a civilizing mission'; to the colonized, it is exploitation. Such concept is better understood when both the views are studied with an objective approach. *Things Fall Apart* is a perfect novel to study colonialism as it deals with the perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the positive and negative impacts of colonialism.

Key words: Colonialism, Religion, Culture, Civilization, Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart was published in 1958 just two years before Nigeria's independence from the British's rule in 1960. Achebe, who was born in 1930, had experienced colonialism in his country. The novel depicts the pre-colonial and early colonial Nigerian society. Colonialism had brought a lot of social, economical and political changes to the colonized country, and these changes could be positive or negative. Chinua Achebe deals with both the good and bad sides of colonialism in *Things Fall Apart*. He neither blindly justifies colonialism, nor does he utterly disapprove it.

Colonialism is evil when its purpose becomes looting the economy and hijacking the culture of the people. The title of the novel itself strikes a negative note as it indicates falling apart of things. It is taken from the English poem, "The Second Coming," by W.B. Yeats. Both Yeats' poem and Achebe's novel speak of the breakdown of the old order and its replacement by a new order. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe talks about the breaking down of African custom and way of life, and how it has been superseded by the Western way of life. Veena Jain says here:

When Yeats writes: "Things fall apart, the center cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," he foresees the end of Christian civilization. Achebe predicts the end of the traditional African society... the Second Coming of Christ as a horror vision of the "rough beast" is ironically akin to the advent of the white missionaries and white administrations. They bring about the catastrophic end and disjunction of Umuofia and consequently of Okonkwo, the hero who stands for Africanness (177).

In the novel *Things Fall Apart* Achebe showed that before the arrival of the colonisers, Africa was peaceful, and life went on smoothly. But, the colonisers disrupted the peaceful existence of African society. Clash of civilizations took place, and the civilization of the colonizers succeeded in subjugating the culture of the natives. J M Waghmare said, “Things Fall Apart not only presents the portrait of tragic collision between the white settlers and the native Africans, but it also affirms the fact that Africans did not live in a void; they had their civilization, culture, traditions and history” (119). This cultural encounter was presented through the story of the protagonist, Okonkwo.

The novel began with the description of success and greatness of Okonkwo in Umuofia and other neighbouring villages. He was a successful man in every possible way by the Igbo standard. He was a wrestling champion, a great warrior and a wealthy farmer. Okonkwo was thus considered one of the greatest men of his time. But, his life took an unexpected turn after he inadvertently killed one of his clan-men. As a punishment for this crime, he was exiled to Mbanta for seven years. This incident in a way paved the way for colonisation to make inroad into Umuofia. After seven years of exile, Okonkwo finally returned home. Much water had flown under the bridge since he left. No one seemed to pay attention to their warrior’s return. “The new religion and government and trading stores were very much in the people's eyes and minds ... they talked and thought about little else, and certainly not about Okonkwo's return” (149). Things had fallen apart already. There were the church, the court and administration of the white men. He also found that many natives had converted to Christianity – “not only the low born and the outcast, but sometimes a worthy man had joined it. Such a man was Ogbuefi Ugonna, who had taken two titles...” (180). Igbo people started forgetting their ancient gods, thinking that their gods were false. One convert named Enoch even dishonoured the custom of his own people by unmasking an *egwugwu*, which was considered one of the greatest crimes. The new converts started making fun of their ancient faith and even threatened to burn their shrines claiming their gods were dead and impotent. One *osu*, an outcast who was newly converted to Christianity, killed a royal python, the most revered animal that the natives addressed it ‘Our Father’, in Mbanta. It was evident that colonialism had brought a stark division among the natives. Okonkwo wanted to fight the white men and their followers to protect his religion and customs. But it was too late because, as Obierika claimed, many of their own brothers had joined the white men. There were many natives who were ready to fight for the white men. Thus, the division and hatred among the natives was quite visible. There was no longer unity among them. So, Achebe says in the novel, “He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (183).

Okonkwo mourned for his clan and missed those old days of unity among his people. He could not help brooding over the prospect of annihilation of his society, culture and civilization. He wanted to take up his machete and killed those invaders. However, his clan-men were not ready to join him to fight the colonisers. Though the men of Umuofia were fine warriors whom all the neighbouring clans were afraid of, the new enemy seemed to be so powerful that they could not fight against. They might be worried that they might also face the fate of Abame. To avenge a white man killed by the natives in Abame, the colonizers killed almost everybody in the village. Justification of killing, subjugation and use of force by colonizers were common. Extirpating anyone or anything that poses a threat to colonizers’ scheme is justified by the colonizers. According to Joseph Chamberlain:

“You cannot have omelets without breaking eggs; you cannot destroy the practices of barbarism, of slavery, of superstition, which for centuries have desolated the interior of Africa, without the use of force”

Pre-colonial judicial system in Africa had lost its place. Natives’ way of trial by *egwugwu*, as seen in the case of Ozowulu and his wife’s dispute, was not recognized by the colonisers. The native judicial system was no longer effective because white men bought their government and their law was enforced. Now the white men’s court tried cases and even gave punishment to culprits. Any malefactors who caused trouble to the Christians and their administration were put in prison. The District Commissioner judged cases and gave punishment if necessary. Achebe writes:

They guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man's law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some molested the Christians. They were beaten in the prison by the *Kotma* and made to work every morning clearing the government compound and fetching wood for the white Commissioner and the court messengers. Some of these prisoners were men of little who should be above such mean occupation (181).

Okonkwo's desire to fight back the colonizers and preserve his custom rekindled after he and his clan leaders were humiliated at the white men's court. Six leaders, including Okonkwo, of Umuofia were invited on the pretext of having a meeting with the District Commissioner. But soon after their arrival in his headquarters, they were handcuffed, imprisoned and humiliated for three days. They were released only after the people of Umuofia paid a huge fine of two hundred and fifty bags of cowries to the white man. The day he was released, at night Okonkwo got ready with his war dress and weapons, and anticipated a war. On the next day morning, a meeting was held at the marketplace. Five court messengers came to stop the meeting. It is interesting to note that the colonisers who strived to introduce democracy and rule of law, did not allow people to have a democratic gathering. In a fit of rage, Okonkwo killed the messenger who came to stop the public meeting. Thus, he avenged the humiliation at the white men's court and the anarchy in his village. However, his attempt to fight back colonialism also led to an abrupt anagnorisis that his people were not ready to join him in the fight. He killed the head messenger of the British District Commissioner, but his people allowed other messengers to escape. Okonkwo, who expected an appreciation for this courageous act from his people, was rather questioned, "Why did he do it"? Being a great warrior in his clan, Okonkwo perhaps felt the responsibility to lead his men and fight foreign intrusion. Unfortunately, he won no support from his people. Unable to defend his custom and tradition, and unable to accept the foreign culture, he committed suicide. His death symbolizes the crumbling down of Igbo culture and African culture at large. Colonisation thus destroyed the tradition, culture and civilization of Igbo society.

The novel which started with the description of greatness of Okonkwo ended with his abominable death. His people mourned his death. Obeirika said, "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." (214). But, the death of such a leader means nothing important to the colonizers. The colonizers even belittled this great Igbo man. The District Commissioner wrote a book titled *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. In this book he reduced the story of Okonkwo, the hero of Umuofia who fought for the protection of his culture and civilization, into a paragraph. To the District Commissioner, Okonkwo's greatness did not deserve a whole chapter. The title of the book is also ironical because the colonizers who came to pacify the primitive tribes, who were in peace before their arrival, succeeded in driving the native hero in committing suicide, and ended up causing anarchy among the people.

However, Achebe was not completely against colonialism because he depicted the good sides of it in the novel. He was not blindly against the positive changes brought by the colonizers. The fact that he was not downright anti-colonialism can be seen in the language he wrote. Unlike Ngugi wa thiongo who stopped writing in English, Achebe wrote in the colonial language i.e. English. In the novel, Achebe also showed that the destruction and crumbling down of African tradition was not totally due to the intervention of European colonizers through their religion and government. Many Africans willingly joined Christianity, as they found many evils in their custom. People in their own society started asking against their evil practices like throwing of twins. Obierika and Nwoye thought of the twins who were thrown just after they were born; they asked what sin these newly born children committed –the sin for which they deserved to be mercilessly thrown away in the forest to die. "Nwoye heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest" (64)

It was this new religion, Christianity which welcomed the mothers of the twins, and saved the life of the twins. Twins were rescued from the forest by the missionaries. One convert named Nneka was pregnant when she joined the Christians. She knew it would be safe to be with the Christians if she gave birth to twins

again. It is not difficult to imagine how much heart breaking it would be for the mothers of twins when their twins were snatched away from their arms and threw them away in the forest.

“Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and child-births. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians.” (156)

The main reason behind Nwoye’s joining Christianity was that he could not find a reasonable answer why Ikemefuna was killed by his father. Killing of an innocent boy under the instruction of the Oracle is savagery and inhuman. Young generation of Okonkwo’s son could not understand such barbaric custom. It was also the Oracle that told the people of Abame to kill the white man who came to their village. Rational and sensible natives like Uchendu regretted killing the innocent white man and said “Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of people of Abame were fools.” (144). The failure of the Evil Forest to harm the missionaries for constructing a church in its area, also somehow threw light on their false beliefs. Another reason behind this new religion’s becoming popular was that there was no caste difference or discrimination in it. *Osu*, the outcast, did not find a place in Umuofian society; they always lived in isolation from the people; they were like untouchables. But in Christianity these *Osus* were equally treated and given the opportunity to live among them. So, there was no reason why the *Osus* would not like to join Christianity.

The natives had so many superstitious beliefs and practices that some of which were cruel and barbaric. For instance, if a man died during the Week of Peace, he was not buried, but cast into the Evil Forest. A man afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs, was not allowed to die at home. He had to be carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die and rot away. To the natives, such sickness was considered an abomination to the earth goddess and therefore the victim could not be buried in her bowels. Okonkwo’s father Unoka met such a fate; he was not allowed a proper burial. Such practice is inhuman. “There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree.” (19). Okonkwo’s drinking palm wine from the head of a human being is savagery. Obierika could not understand the savagery form of punishment given to Okonkwo for his inadvertently killing of Ezeudu’s son. Besides being exiled for seven years, his houses were set on fire, property was destroyed and animals were killed.

The colonial government also brought education with them. Schools were set up and the natives were given education; thus they gained new knowledge. Superstitious beliefs started giving way to rational belief. Besides school, hospital was also established. Trading store built in Umoufia made trade possible and people got money through it. They could sell surplus grains which they would have thrown after the new grains were harvested. Thus surplus produce was not wasted.

CONCLUSION

That colonialism has its positive and negative effects is thus explicated. While negative impact has to be condemned, the positive changes should not be overlooked. Chinua Achebe himself had agreed that there were imperfections in his society, but colonialism was not something that made all the imperfections perfect. In his ‘The Novelist as Teacher’, Achebe observes, “ I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past - with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them”.

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