

## **Sustaining cultural values in African tertiary institutions through literature: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as a paradigm**

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### ***Abstract***

*The impact of imperialism appears to have registered on the psyche of most African peoples, especially the youth, a kind of inferiority complex about their culture; hence anything associated with Africa is labeled inferior and disgraceful. The study attempts to highlight the pre-colonial cultural activities in traditional African society using Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart in order to create awareness; initiate reconciliation between the past and the present culture, encourage tolerance and acceptance that African values are preferable. Using Content Analysis Approach of qualitative research method, the study examined the colonial imperialism to expose its impact on African peoples and in the process re-create history and induce scholarly attention. The theoretical framework was hinged on Post-Colonial Theory. The findings revealed that the text is a true reflection of African culture, history, belief, myths, religion and politics modeled in folklore form and techniques which confirms affirmation of faith in its cultural heritage. These norms could be injected into modern society through such literature. It concluded that since literature has the capability of articulating the traditional culture and integrating it into the modern world, it may be considered a compulsory subject in African tertiary institutions to ensure continuity.*

**Keywords:** culture, folklore, values, imperialism, literature

## **Introduction**

Literary texts all over the world portray the way creative writers view and express their universe. They are historical records of memorable experience generally accepted as the representation of life, the interpretation of the culture, the enemy of evil forces in society, the conservers of values and terror of bad government (Nnolim: 255). According to Ngugi, the relationship between creative literature and other forces cannot be ignored especially in Africa, where modern literature has grown against the violent background of European imperialism and its changing manifestations; slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Our culture over the last hundred years has developed against the same stunting and dwarfing background. All African countries shared their colonial experiences in diverse ways which equally affects their literary works of arts. The literatures of African peoples have their special and distinctive regional characteristics having emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization. Their literatures arose from the ashes of their past experiences depicting a strong sense of loss, loss of dignity, loss of culture, loss of religion and humanity. The titles of most celebrated literary works highlighted these losses, examples; Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Weep Not, Child* and Allen Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (Nnolim, 257).

Most of these literary texts in line with post-colonial theory not only trace African cultural origin, but also restore dignity of the Africans. They try to establish the fact that the rule of the colonial masters is not synonymous with civilization. They therefore recreate a history of Africa with a philosophy of highly acclaimed cultural values.

Post-Colonial Theory plays a vital role in projecting the relevance of the colonized peoples. It started in the 1950s with the work of Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. The theory portrays the historical aesthetic, economic and social impacts of the European imperialism on cultures of the colonized nations as well as the responses of these societies. It highlights what happens to a culture from the onset of colonization (Ashcroft Bill ii).

The theory also analyzes how European nations conquer and control their third world cultures. Cultural inferiority is enforced on them by their colonizers. Dobie observes that “when people are colonized, their traditions and practices are supplanted by imitations of those of the colonizers. Parts of the indigenous culture as elemental as food, clothing, and recreation tend to disappear, because they are either hidden or replaced, thereby removing that culture from history” (205).

The theory reveals the Europeans do not only physically colonize the land but also erase the beliefs and traditions of the natives and replace with theirs. The colonized peoples abandon and devalue their cultural practices. They adopt the culture, language and clothing of their colonizers, see their own as inferior and as a result become increasingly imitative. The postcolonial theory was also influenced by Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* which describes sets of concepts used to evaluate knowledge about non-European peoples. The theory provides a suitable platform for the colonized to speak for themselves, to proclaim their cultural superiority, struggle for their political and cultural autonomy.

## **Effects of imperialism on Africans**

Africans are according to Sedar Senghor producers of culture and not just its consumers. The problems posed by conditions in South Africa for instance, have tremendously affected the fiction of the black South Africans. Their literatures show the crack and tension of language working under strain. The means of communication is controlled by the colonial authority of the racist state evident in the censorship exercised by the government over newspapers, journals and other creative writings. There is literal silencing which will not permit the freedom necessary to appropriate language. There is also silence which precedes the act of appropriation. Even those writers with literal freedom find themselves 'languageless', gagged by the imposition of English on their world paradoxically, in order to develop a voice they must first keep silent. All writings in South African is a form of protest. The psychological trauma of racial discrimination has so much affected the literary pattern of South African novels. Unlike Ngugi, Achebe, Amadi, Soyinka and others, the black South African novelists highlight ready-made plots centered on rural violence, social apartheid or interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning. Their works center mainly on life of the Johannesburg Township, the glimpses of the different company of thugs, pimps and their "nice time girls". The Negritude movement,

was the centre piece of Africa's literary nationalism which closely followed political nationalism in the wake of political independence for all black peoples. To regain cultural initiative, to imbue political independence with national and cultural pride, to embark on the path of psychic

reconstruction were what gave birth to the literary movement now known as Negritude. (Nnolim 15)

French literary influence was so strong in Africa that it created the vital difference between the literature of English speaking Africa (Anglophone) and the (Francophone) those of French speaking Africa. Based on the harsh nature of French Assimilation, the literatures of the French speaking Africans were more confrontational and centered more on the concept of Negritude. This simply,

is the whole complex of civilized values – cultural, economic, social and political which characterize the black peoples or more precisely, the Negro African world. All these values are essentially informed by intuitive reason .... The sense of communion the gift of myth making the gift of rhythm such are the essential elements of negritude which you will find indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man. (Senghor 11)

It was both a literary and ideological movement organized by French-speaking black scholars. The word negritude was framed by Aime Cesaire in 1939, which meant “the simple recognition of the fact that one is black, the acceptance of this fact and of one destiny as blacks, of our history and culture” Aime Cesaire was a well-known poet, playwright and politician from Martinique. He discovered the black community in Paris where he studied which helped him to “rediscover his pride”. He saw negritude not just as the fact of being black but also proud. Having realized that the

inferiority complex of the blacks was a result of Western imperialism, he resorted to “decolonization of the mind”. Apart from Cesaire, other founders of negritude were Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas. The movement imbibed Marxist ideas to revolt against the white colonial powers and their values. Soyinka criticized the ideology, arguing that “A tiger does not proclaim his tigeritude, he pounces”. However, negritude was formed when the Africans were admonishing for their independence from their colonial masters, so negritude ideologists needed to blow their trumpet and proclaim their tigeritude.

It may be necessary to add that imperialism had also created in most African countries, uninhabitable and hostile environment. In West Africa, Nigeria to be precise, Kaine Agary’s *Yellow Yellow* portrayed the oil-related pollution of the Niger Delta area. Pollution stands for other aspects of moral laxity brought about by the influx of the British. These foreigners were attracted by the oil in Africa. Agary linked the destruction of Niger Delta region with the violation of woman. Zilayefa lamented, “the day my mother’s farmland was overrun by crude oil was the day her dream for me started to wither...” 10). Such hazardous toxic substances split in the farms and rivers destroy living organisms in the river and fertility of the land. Ojaide discovered, “The water was no longer the herb-dark draught that she liked to dip her hands and wash her face with. It was light green, greasy and smelly. The large fish population had either been decimated by chemicals from oil industries or migrated from downstream into the ocean” (84).The natives who were mostly fishermen depended on imported fish. Their fishes were no more. Ebi wondered how the activities of the oil companies could deprive them of their delicacies – oil beans, breadfruit, mushroom,

urhurhu grapes, water-leaf, greens, water yam, ikpaho groundnuts taro roots, sweet cassava and lemon leaves (87).

Agary however fights a twin war of violence against Niger Delta environment and violence against woman beings. The Niger Deltans were robbed of their economic resources as well as their women. Moral decadence was on the increase as prostitution became the order of the day. Most women hang out with men working in the oil companies. These men take advantage of these women the same manner they plunder the land for oil leaving both empty and abandoned. Agary's war of violence against women and violence against the environment confirms the spiritual connection between the environment and women. Destruction of land is as good as dispossession of the land which in essence symbolizes loss of roots and identity.

African literature criticizes severely white supremacy and values. It draws black people close to their culture and tradition. "The function of the artist in Africa, in keeping with our traditions and needs, demand that the writer, as a public voice, assume a responsibility to reflect public concerns in his writings, and not preoccupy himself with his puny ego" (Chinweizu et al 74). It may be important to note that literature can influence people positively or negatively, especially young people in their formative stage. It is therefore necessary for the government and its agencies to censor all literary works recommend in schools and colleges and expunge those "books made poisonous by their emphasis on crime, sex (any form of pornography) horror, or books that limit a child's perspective, cultural, religious or civil horizon" (Acholonu 243). A well censored African Literature will certainly project the values of African cultural heritage and encourage its continuity.

## **Literature as an agent of cultural preservation**

The post-colonial literatures are mostly concerned with reconstructing Africa's image bruised and distorted by colonial intrusion, especially by white writers who saw in Africa a savage people without humanity, saw in its climate an impenetrable and uninhabitable jungle teeming with wild animals, dispensing illness and death to the white man, and saw in Africa's culture and traditions a senselessness that made an entire continent irrelevant in world history. African literary artists demonstrated through their works the beauty in our art, the meaning in our rituals, the logic in our traditional legal systems and the soundness in our healing ways. The uniqueness of African literatures takes its shape from its orature, oral based origins, its orality and its myth-making (Nnolim: 10). They make use of and owe allegiance to their folk literature and creatively make use of local proverbs, legends, folktales and myths in giving expression to their culture. Being mostly concerned with cultural assertion, they have highlighted the dignity in their folkways and oral heritage. Some are spoken like proverbs, riddles, myths, legends and incantations. Others are sung like lullabies and war songs while rituals, festivals, initiations and masquerades are acted. Riddles test one's knowledge of wise sayings while jokes help to release tension through laughter, to make a point and to avoid direct confrontations. Proverbs are employed to instruct, advise, warn or guide.

Chinua Achebe, with proper sense of history, presents, *Things Fall Apart* with objectivity, "a cross-cultural conflicts between the early European colonizers and missionaries who came to Africa at the tail end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Africans they encountered on their arrival" (Emenyonu 29). His aims is to help his society, "regain belief in itself and put away the

complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement” (Achebe 3). He also conveys to his African readers that despite all its alleged imperfections, their past “was not one long night of slavery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them” (Achebe 4).

In the traditional society, wealth is synonymous with strength as they are predominantly farmers. Emphasis is laid more on hard work and personal achievement. Nwakibie reassures Okonkwo “it pleases me to see a young man like you, these days our youths have gone so soft. Many young men have come to ask me for yams but I have refused them because I know they would just dump them in the earth and leave them to be choked by weeds... I shall give you twice four hundred yams. Go ahead and prepare your farm” (17). A man is judged according to his worth not according to the worth of his father. “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings”. (7). Unoka, contrarily, is treated with disdain because of his laziness and improvidence. He prefers playing flute to working. Okonkwo, though still young, has taken two titles, shown prowess in inter-tribal wars and brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the cat. A man’s social status and achievement can only be determined by strength and wealth. Okonkwo is described as a wealthy farmer with two barns full of yams and had just married his third wife (6). In fact, no body becomes rich by stealing or embezzling community fund, a virtue which is gradually phasing out. The traditional society operates

... a highly effective democratic government. The government was through the cultural and traditional council of Elders (*Ndichie*), Council of Masquerades

(*Egwugwu*), the Oracles and Chief priests who were the liaison between the people and the gods. The traditional government had a set of rules and laws which must be obeyed by all. The Council of masquerades was presided over by the ‘Evil Forest’, the leaders of Umuofia. They tried cases and inflicted punishments. The law of the land was no respecter of persons. (Emenyonu 49)

People are very comfortable with the system of government devoid of bribery, corruption and intimidation. There is transparency, equity and impartial enforcement of laws. Every decision is taken in accordance with the rules and regulations of the land. No one is above the law. Okonkwo, for instance, a titled man and highly respected is fined for beating his wife during the Week of Peace. Ezeani the priest of the earth goddess, tells Okonkwo, “Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors” (24). He ordered Okonkwo to bring to the shrine of Ani one she-goat, one hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries (24). A reasonable peaceful co-existence is maintained. Sacrifices to appease the gods are required for minor offences while murder cases extracts exile. This contrasts the white man’s government which flogs people who commit minor offences and hang those who commit murder (Emenyonu 50).

There is a valid religious system. People believe in God (*Chukwu*) through gods and goddesses. The concept of God is clearly defined in the conversation between Akunna and Mr Brown (pp 142 – 143). They reverence the gods and goddesses,

consult them before taking most decisions. The deities are believed to be capable of doing anything. This is evident in Ezeani's dialogue with Okonkwo when the later commits *nso-ani*, "you are not a stranger in Umuofia ... the evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish" 24). The gods and the goddesses communicate to the public through the Oracles and Diviners, and nobody questions the will of the gods. So absolute is the belief that "... in fairness to Umuofia, it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just and was accepted as such by its Oracle – the Oracle of the Hills and Caves"(10). Oracles are the major tools in controlling crimes and ensuring compliance with cultural norms.

In addition, Obiako suddenly gave up his wine taping trade because "the Oracle warned him that he would fall off a palm tree and kill himself" (16). Umuofia is feared by all its neighbours. It is well known as land of the brave (*Umuofia obodo dike*). It is powerful in war and in magic, its priests and medicine men are honoured (10), yet, religious practices and beliefs are sacred and observed. People get answers and solutions to their problems through traditional religion.

Another thing that validates a culture and justifies its religion and ritual is folklore. It includes,

myth, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among a homogeneous group of people; it is a major component in the total folk culture of such a homogeneous group of people. The most inclusive part of folklore is the folktale, a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told

either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and teach a lesson. (Nnolim 16)

Folktale provides amusement, entertainment and moral instruction. It fosters cultural continuity. It is an important method of teaching the young people material culture, belief, traditions and philosophies of their native land. It usually has a recurrent chief character who is a trickster – that often gets tricked himself while trying to trick others. It is usually told to draw attention to the doings and plight of the little people of society and how the gods reward them of their honesty or punished those who are greedy and over ambitious. Achebe centers basically on the role of literature especially folklore and tales to the fabric and psyche of both society and the individual. The rooting of identity, sense of belonging and existence of a tradition are all enhanced by the presence and function of orature. He carefully chooses his folk tale for its structural importance. The tale of tortoise and the birds is a typical example. The sudden rise and fall of tortoise represents the rise and fall of the hero, Okonkwo. The feathers lent to tortoise by the birds to enable him fly to the sky stand for the total support given to Okonkwo by his people that enable him go to Mbaino as an emissary on mission of war (10). The tortoise is eventually deserted in the sky by all the birds, he falls and his shell breaks into pieces just like Okonkwo is exiled and abandoned by the people of Umuofia. He returns from exile to discover Umuofia “breaking and falling apart” (163).

Masquerade cult is another aspect of oral tradition explored to portray the richness of traditional African culture. The masked spirits are believed to represent ancestors who have been

committed to mother earth at death and emerged again through ant holes. Nothing intoxicates a man in traditional African society, like donning a mask and distinguishing himself in it. The masked spirit forms the highest judicial body in African society. (The case between Uzowulu and his wife Mgbafo adjudicated by nine masked spirits come to mind). The masquerade cult is strictly for the initiated. It is the force that razed the church and Enoch's compound to the ground when he unmasked the Egwugwu (one of the greatest crimes one could commit in Umuofia)."The mother of the Spirit walked the length and breadth of the clan, weeping for the murdered son. It was a terrible night"(149). They combine in their social functions the duty of police to maintain order and the force of army both to force and enforce the law in those instances when the law of the land must be obeyed. "Except during a festival when the masquerades entertain crowds with dancing and frivolous chasing around of initiated young men in a test of speed and endurance in both long and short distant races, nothing is taken lightly about a masquerade except perhaps by Christians. Even Christians are thoroughly dealt with any time they dare" (Nnolim 68). Another important function of the masked spirits is burying the dead especially when the dead is a very important member of the society. When Ogbuefi Ezeudu died the Egwugwu accorded solemnity and dignity to the burial ceremony. They added magic as one of the ancestral spirits carried a basket of water. The dance by the masked spirits is the high point of every traditional festival.

The soundness of our healing ways is depicted when Ezinma lay shivering on a mat beside a huge fire that her mother had kept burning all night, "It is *iba*, said Okonkwo as he took his matchet and went into the bush to collect the leaves and grasses and bark

of trees that went into making the medicine for *iba*” (60). In traditional society, healing is spiritual, not scientific. Natural ingredients are used for treatment by traditional African healers. The medicines are purely organic and very efficacious without any repercussion (Azabre).

Despite the fact that the natives are superstitious, believe in *ogbanje*-whereby a child is alleged to plague its mother by dying and entering the womb to be born again, segregate *osu* (out casts) and reject twins, African peoples are very hospitable and pleasant. Their high regards for greeting, handshake, respect for the elders, moral values are the backbones that promote developmental success and therefore should be adhered to. Africa has a rich culture with strong family ties. The extended family system promotes kindness, habit of sharing, fraternity, cordial interpersonal/family relationships. This enables Okonkwo to survive in Mbanta during his exile. Human life is cherished. It is an abomination for one to take his life. According to Obierika, “it is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his kinsmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it” (165). The moral code of conduct forbids it. There are also entertainments like wrestling matches, traditional marriage ceremonies, new yam festivals, traditional music and other cultural activities which project the rich and wide culture in Africa.

Achebe has really confirmed that, “African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity” (8). Western culture has indeed dominated the traditional culture making most Africans derail from their indigenous way of life. African children should be made to

understand, as Obierika observes, that the white man who says that our custom is bad does not understand our custom about land and does not also speak our tongue (141). African youth should be nurtured in African culture through literature which, “whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality” (Achebe 117). The fundamental building blocks of literature will help sustain continuity.

### **Conclusion**

Most African literary artists, like Achebe, have successfully explored the culture as well as the economic and psychological effects of imperialism on the African peoples. They thoroughly exploit their own immediate environment to highlight thematic focus. They look back to the community, from which they emerged, explain the psychology and philosophy behind African thought while taking their place in the modern world. (Ohwovoriole 228); to harness cultural exploration in a most meaningful way. Most African traditional societies are endowed with a good number of cultural practices and values that need to be retained despite the level of modernity and Western civilization. For a continuum to be maintained from generation to generation, material and “non-material aspects of culture, which embraces institutional, creative and philosophical matters, which elaborately imply social, economic, political, legal, oral or written literature, visual and performing arts, ideas, beliefs, values, symbols, language...” (Ibekwe 453), should be embedded in the curriculum. Literature may successfully contribute to what Soyinka calls “survival patterns” of traditional culture in Africa (90). It mirrors society, conveys the history, teaches moral and preserves the culture.

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