

PERMEATING IMPERIALISM IN INDIA AND NIGERIA: A STUDY OF THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract: Challenging the Europeans' characteristic demarcation of the African customs and traditions, Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* penetrates deep into the profoundly complex foundation of native Igbo culture dislocated by their weakening clannish bonds and advancing Church Government. Like in the Indian Sub-continent, the European Imperialism commenced with small-scale trade, finally permeated through the whole African continent to strip the people off their indigenous ways, false beliefs and misleading traditions. The missionary church that embraced outcasts and titled persons alike provided solace to gloomy Nneka, who had her three twins devoured by superstitious dogma, Nwoye who was puzzled by the haunting questions relating to the twins crying in the bush and innocent Ikemefuna's slaughter, and numerous others. The imperialist regime posed questions at the long held ideals both in India and in the Igbo society and found in "the words of the hymns" piousness of "the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth." It was the fault and fear of the natives that provided converts to the Church who later came in open confrontation against the established norms of their own society. In the novel, the enraged band of egwugwu sets ablaze the church and faces instant retaliation from the colonizers supported by their native followers. While comparing the Indian scenario with the African, one comes across the fact that a nonnegotiable number of natives always kept themselves distanced, out of individual concerns and interests, from the protest. Rather than helping the egwugwu, the cowardly co-villagers remained unnaturally silent and grieved about their ancestral gods having been desecrated by the powerful Church. Warlike Okonkwo made supreme sacrifice in order to save the Igbo culture but the clannish infirmities, trade greed, incomprehensible superstitions, and fear of the British scepter ruined the established fort of the native conventions. Thus, there existed people who remained nearly unaffected by the advent of the British and their overriding the native lifestyle yet people who felt the belief that the natives were 'white man's burden' abusive did not easily bow to the colonizer's interest, and preferred death to dishonor.

Keywords: Igbo Culture, Okonkwo, Imperialist regime, Indigenous, Native culture and traditions, Egwugwu, Superstitions

Thomas B. Macaulay, in his seminal essay, "Minutes on Indian Education", speaks of building "a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (mssu). The methodology of the English can thus be traced showing slight or no deviation from a set path that it followed successfully through time and space. Both the Indian Subcontinent and the African Continent fell prey to the small trade exchanges initiated by the imperialist regime. While slowly and steadily firming its foothold on foreign land the well thought out plans of colonisation were carried out. It not only resulted into gradual wiping out of the primary ethnicities of the land but also in practically washing away the hierarchical cultural institutions. An exponent of depicting the Afro-British encounter, Chinua Achebe, in his magnum opus *Things Fall Apart*, portrays this confrontation providing the work the stature of a classic.

It is an open secret that while the Africans were intoxicating themselves with the foreign brandy, the Europeans, very shrewdly, were dividing their lands on the maps. The unquenchable thirst for land of the Europeans forced them to impose an undeclared biological warfare on the African countries. It is ironic to learn that the French killed the native West Africans by distributing blankets to the local people in the winter season. Contaminated with dangerous bacteria the blankets became a tool in killing the people who used them. The British, also in the race to capture bigger landmass, finally occupied Nigeria. Desmond Tutu, Nobel Prize winner, once aptly remarked, "When the white missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land" (Biography). The British ultimately had the Bible in one hand and land in other hand. They implied the weapons like conversion to Christianity, observing welfare measures like opening of schools and colleges and military adventures. Moreover, like Indian soil, the Nigerian soil too was fertile that resulted in their flourishing by leaps and bounds.

There are three dimensions of checking how the Britons cordoned whole of the Nigeria in general and her lower parts in particular. The reasons of similarities and dissimilarities between India and Nigeria can also be

juxtaposed. While in India, Sir Thomas Roe and Captain Hawkins, the harbingers of the trading East India Company, were greeted amicably by the Emperor Jahangir who also showered over them a number of trade exemptions only in order to gain access to the British wine and other luxurious commodities, the Igbo people of Nigerian clans, as depicted in *Things Fall Apart*, did not hold their arms open to them. Though the Indian subcontinent had numerous other political powers that included the valiant Marathas and Rajputs yet they proved toothless in putting a check to the advancing vanguards of the British invaders who ultimately exploited them in every possible way-- social, political, economical, intellectual and cultural.

Initially, an English missionary riding on bicycle reconnoitered the Abame village but the tribesmen killed him with a view to saving their clan from being debased and superstitiously tied his bicycle to the so-called "sacred silk-cotton tree" (131). As a consequence, some days later, the villagers faced a heavy vengeance as three white men with numerous African followers cordoned the market stuffed with the armless villagers and shot them dead as happened during the Jalianwala Bagh massacre when the regime opened fire at hundreds and thousands of unarmed people. Contrary to the expectation of an armed struggle of retribution, the God-fearing clan took it an inevitable event because the Oracle had already prophesied the impending butchery of the village by the angelic white men.

Secondly, a trained army of local people was prepared by the English who despite being handful in number commanded them to keep the colonies enslaved. Ironically, the number of the British soldiers never exceeded 40000 in India, but with the help of the local soldiers they yoked the natives slavishly for more than two centuries. India retaliated only in mid-eighteenth century when in the Battle of *Plassey* in 1757 they proved themselves a force to be reckoned with mightier than the Mughals and the Marathas. Like other African nations, Nigeria too disintegrated into a number of free clans that constantly waged wars not against the common enemy but against one another over trivial matters and thus never organizing into one force that could oust the English out of Nigeria. Nor was there any centripetal political entity that could bind the shattered and isolated nomadic settlements of the clannish culture.

Moreover, like Indians, the Igbo people too were superstitious and gullible who followed silly superstitions blindly and fanatically in the name of faith without realizing that faith and superstition are two highly diverse practices. The Igbo people never answered in 'yes' which according to them might call 'evil spirits'. Instead of 'yes' they asked 'is that me?' Strangely enough, in order to avoid apparitions, the children were warned against whistling at night, and were seldom allowed to have eggs as such food, they believed, could tempt them to steal. The word 'snake' was substituted by 'string' as it was believed by them that the real snake might hear and harm them. They opined that on seeing a shining moon the cripples would become hungry for a walk. The pregnant women adorned the sacred ancient 'silk-cotton tree' as the "Spirit of good children lived in that tree waiting to be born" (43).

The villagers of Mbanta were preached by the first missionary that "we have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to Him so that you may be saved when you die" (137). The villagers were persuaded to abandon gods of wood and follow their God. While the whites were observing the theory of the 'White Men's Burden' to be mended and told the ways to reach God, the villagers, comically, neither perceived the missionaries as a threat nor reacted violently, despite their calling the Nigerian gods 'false.' In order to construe the superiority of the Holy Trinity as one God, the whites mocked at Umuofia's gods for being incapable and harmless.

In 1025, when Mahmud Gazanavi attacked Somnath Temple, the god-fearing Indians believed that with his divine powers Somnath Maharaj, the deity, would himself kill him. But, history is evident that Mahmud, who had come with the dream of being known as the 'idol breaker' in the world, took the idol to Gazani while kicking it and thus, disrespecting the Hindu faith in the most savage way. Similarly, believing that the forest's sinister spirits would kill them within four days, the village elders gave the missionaries a portion of 'evil forest' where clansmen had died of evil diseases like leprosy and smallpox when they asked for a plot of land to build the church. When they emerged alive, it was rumoured that the white men could see and talk to evil spirits with the help of their spectacles, and consequently the first three converts were won by them. The villagers, with an utmost urge to prove their age old beliefs right, then concocted a story about the dead ancestors sometimes taking a month to kill men. But as the white missionaries still didn't die, rather were found building new houses, they again won many converts including Nneka who "had four previous pregnancies and child-births. But each time she had born 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. It was a good riddance" (142-143). The pregnant wife of a prosperous farmer wanting to get rid of her, she was believed to be cursed as she bore twins that were accustomed to be thrown away immediately. It should not surprise anyone to know that a woman whose four pairs of twins were already killed due to superstitious dogmas would have found solace into her conversion to Christianity. Thus, it was the faults and fears of the clansmen themselves that provided prolific land to the new religion to blossom.

Through his benevolent and pragmatic advices Mr. Brown proved to be instrumental in instilling Christianity into local Umufoian populace. Rather than imposing and making it a compulsion to follow Christianity he gained the trust of the villagers peacefully and harmoniously by building a hospital and a school. He predicted that “if Umufoia failed to send her children to the school, strangers would come from other places to rule them” (171). After his having entreated the villagers to send their children to school the dubious villagers preferred sending their slaves and lazy children to the school. Brown’s effective hospital and quick medical treatment won all round praise. Moreover, many people of Umuofia were content in entirety with the white men’s influence on their community as by having trading posts set up by them “for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umufoia” (170).

The missionary church welcomed not only twins but also embraced outcasts. It treated everyone equal and preachers were sent to the surrounding villages for conversion. The titleless persons added the most to it because they believed that the church did not cater any monetary or caste-based discrimination among the people. The wavering converts drew inspiration and confidence from Kiaga who once ordered the outcasts to shave off their long and tangled hair but they were afraid of death by doing so. When no negative consequence was faced by them for having cut their hair many villagers came to believe in Christian God’s superiority over their own. Okonkwo’s son Nwoye also challenged the hollow Igbo ideals and felt “the words of the hymns like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth” (129). His embracing Christianity was a response of the long-held doubts that he had about his native religion that asked for abandoning newborn twins and, about innocent Ikemefuna’s slaughter. The outcasts and the parents of twin babies (who, in order to prevent evil from entering the village had to kill their newborn babies) obviously found it easier to abandon tradition. Thus, the bonds of Igbo culture weekend while women like Nneka gained comfort. It was with this policy of divide-and-rule that helped the English rise from the status of being mere traders to colonizers of most part of the world.

The novel’s protagonist Okonkwo, a wealthy warrior and a respected leader of the Umuofia clan, a part of a consortium of nine connected villages had in his youth “shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars” and “in Umuofia’s latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet” (10). Thus, Okonkwo emerges out as a man of reputation who was a precocious wrestler besides being a hard-working farmer and a promising fighter. A conceited, stubborn, ill-tempered, and ruthless man, he took pride in the customary and social hierarchies of the clan. He was the uncrowned prince of masculinity like the various Indian warriors like Shivaji and Rani of Jhansi.

Thus, the invincible and the valiant Okonkwo, garnering a want to maintain integrity and solidarity of his land and to nip the British Imperialism in the bud, became a Nigerian equivalent to Sardar Udham Singh who had exclaimed “we must root out this evil. And if our brothers take the side of evil we must root them out too. We must bale this water now that it is only ankle-deep” (193). As the Imperialist intruded in Mbanta, Okonkwo tried to awaken the slumbering nationalism in people by motivating them, “Let us not reason like cowards. If a man comes into my hut and defecates on the floor, what do I do? Do I shut my eyes? No! I take a stick and break his head. That is what a man does” (150). Many worthy and titled clansmen like Ogbuefi Ugonna had become Christians and Okonkwo was bent to exterminate his co-brethren also if they stood by the Whites. But, as millions of Indians the villagers valued tolerating the blasphemy of these offenders to fighting and ostracize the foreign intruders. The tribes thus got immersed into the Western civilization resulting in an end to a strong ethnic era.

During his seven year exile Okonkwo experienced that the virile men of his native village Umuofia had also changed and were subject to the rules and judicial system followed by the whites who by then had grown arrogant as an effect of growth in the strength and influence of the Church. Okonkwo mourned for “the warlike men of Ufuolia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women” (172). Strict and intolerant, Reverend James Smith replaced Mr. Brown and openly defied any respect to the traditional Igbo culture. On the contrary, he demanded utmost obedience to the Bible causing a great conflict between the church and the clan. Having assumed the status of the dominating, the converts soon became the most zealous members of the church. Enoch, one of them, was encouraged by Smith’s attitude and thus insulting the tradition dared to unmask an egwugwu during the annual ceremony organized to honour the earth deity. The next day, “the band of egwugwu moved like a furious whirlwind to Enoch’s compound and with matchete and fire reduced to a desolate heap. And from there they made for the church, intoxicated with destruction” (178). In order to cleanse their village of his horrible sin they burnt down Enoch’s house and the church.

The District Commissioner deceitfully arrested the leaders of Umuofia including Okonkwo. In goal an arrogant and high-headed court messengers called Kotmas, “carried a strong stick, and hit each man a few blows on the head and back” (185). It resulted in the people of Umuofia finally gathering together for lamenting the damage done by their own men and the whites to the clan by profaning of their gods and ancestral spirits. While others tried

to avoid any chance of spilling the blood of the clansmen Okonkwo, a warrior by nature and adamant about saving the custom and tradition, advocated war. Meanwhile, five court messengers approached and arrogantly commanded the crowd to stop the meeting with immediate effect. Okonkwo, in a flood of fury, instantly beheaded the head-messenger but soon realized that, instead of standing with him, the superstitious and cowardly co-villagers preferred remaining unnaturally silent and afraid letting the messenger escape while they criticized his act. Ironically, these were the same villagers who showed 'strong heartedness' during the irrational slaughter of the faultless Ikemefuna, thus revealing the dark truth that human beings exercise force only upon the weaker ones and fear the stronger.

Unable to withstand humiliation on his own land at the hands of foreigners Okonkwo fought unto death single handedly and made supreme sacrifice. His resistance was highly admirable as he left no stone unturned to save the Igbo culture. At last, Okonkwo committed suicide showing his preference to death over dishonour. His futile martyrdom asks the readers to come face to face with the fact that a man who fails to change with time always emerges as a friendless traveler. Despite having laid down his life for his land and people he is denied an honorable cremation. For the clan, suicide was "an offence against the earth and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it" (196). The villagers were so obsessed with the stupid notions that they considered the dead body of the great warrior of the clan, Okonkwo an evil.

By no means perfect Okonkwo may be blamed for being ill-tempered, but he is especially dearer to the Indian readers as he invites his comparison with Indian freedom fighters like Tantia Tope who defied obeying the laws of a foreign government on his own land. The British laws categorized Tope a traitor and war criminal, but in his replies can be traced his devotion for mother India. To the questions put by the President of the tribunal, he replied with utmost calm, fortitude and courage, "I was never under the British rule, and then how can I be a traitor?" and "It is no crime to fight against a foreign aggressor. It is, indeed the most patriotic and virtuous act. I admit the allegation of waging war against the British army. I am ready to face any consequence for fighting against aggressor-enemy, who had no right to occupy India or oppress its people. I am now prepared to face even death sentence for this sacred cause" (Gill 23).

Thus, the oppressing English tyranny emerges out as a result of not any one fault but as an alloy of many dying ideals of the Africans that gave unbridled power to the British advancement. Achebe does not glorify the hollow traditional customs as he believes that they too are highly responsible for colonialism. The economic benefits gained from cross-cultural contact, the charismatic effect of the English medicine and the profitable learning at English schools and superstitions play a dominant role in devouring the clannish culture of Umuofia. Moreover, they did not organize themselves as a civilized society but continued with the old traditions without raising any question to the atrocious practices but are divided for petty interests. That's why the Abame people could not survive the allied attack by the Whites.

We somehow come to equate Okonkwo's zeal to die for his clan with that of Indian martyr Bhagat Singh's "in the honour of his sister the whole Judicature of the Supreme Court stood silently" (Dainik 11). He could also have been acquitted like Captain Shah Nawaj Khan, Caption Prem Nath Sehgal and Lt. Gurbux Singh Dhillon, the honorable members of INA. During their trial in Lal Qila a hush fell in court as the three living martyrs readied themselves to offer their most precious possession – life at the altar of liberty. Their proud statement in the court was that "We had to choose between the Emperor and the Motherland. We have been and still are ready and willing to die for Ma Bharti" (Gill 76).

Things Fall Apart traces major causes leading to timid and gullible bowing by the ritually and heroically adamant people to the interests best suited to the colonizers. Ending in dilemma this work of societal tragedy reflects that equipments of rule in the form of clannish infirmities, unbearable superstitions, incessantly trading greed, lack of co-ordination, local enmity and above all the dread of the invincible British scepter are made available by the oppressed himself to the oppressor. 'The white man's burden' to reform the Blacks lasted long in the form of slavery and a number of patriots had to shed blood to regain liberty.

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