Culture and Imperialism in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

Hadia Adel Khaznah Katbi and Layla Farouq Abdeen

Abstract: The article examines the role that culture and imperialism play in the writing of Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart (1958). This is conducted by focusing upon the status which Achebe occupies in African literature and how such a novel is a means on his part to write back. It shows how the "subalterns" have attained a voice that will finally be heard. Therefore, the objective of this article is to shed light upon essential ideologies, rituals and practices that helped shape the narrative, characterization and themes in the story as a whole in order to refute a discourse imposed by the "other".

Key words: Culture and Imperialism

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe (1938-2013) is considered to be one of the significant novelists, who wrote about formal colonialism in Africa as well as the first decade of decolonization there. He is a significant initiator in the invention of the African culture as it is currently perceived within the institutions of interpretation since he had a tremendous influence on the pedagogical reception of cultural barbarism and primitivism [2].

The Significance of the Study: Literature used to be shrouded with rhetorical deficiency to an independently affirmative culture. Through a language and structure that paved the way for affirmative culture, Things Fall Apart is particularly important for both the marking and the making of the first decade of decolonization. It delves in the themes of cultural, traditional and theological clashes between the colonizer and the colonized. The story portrays an image about the natives that refutes backwardness and reductiveness. It represents a portrayal of the natives that rather deforms their morality, obligation and discipline.

The Objectives of the Study: The objective of this article is to shed light upon essential ideologies, rituals and practices that helped shape the narrative, characterization and themes in the story as a whole. Things Fall Apart offers a different version of a story told by a voice of
authority and profound understanding of a person’s own
native culture in order to refute an imposed discourse by
the other.

Review of Related Literature: James Procter in Stuart Hall
states that Hall, who is one of the founding figures of
cultural studies, says that culture is a site of ongoing
struggles that cannot be guaranteed for one side or the
other. Procter adds that for Hall, the study of culture
requires exposing the relations of power that exist within
a society at any given moment. It also considers how
might subordinate or marginal groups secure their
presence among a cultural space, which is manipulated by
the dominating group [3].

In Literature, Culture and Society, Andrew
Milner says that Raymond Williams thinks that the term
culture is one of the most complicated words in English
language. Milner then says that Williams later on offers
four kinds of meaning related to the term culture by
referring to: An individual habit of the mind, the
intellectual development of an entire society, the arts and
the whole way of life of a group of people [4].

Edward W. Said in Culture and Imperialism comments
that culture means two things in specific. First, culture
means all those practices like the arts of description,
representation and communication that have a relative
autonomy from the social, economic and political realms
and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of its principal
aims is pleasure. Second, culture is a concept that
includes an elevating and a refining element. It is each
society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and
thought of. He states that culture is, on one hand, a
source of identity and on another, a sort of theatre where
diverse ideological and political causes engage one
another [5].

Said also gives an explanation of imperialism, which
is power and sovereignty extended over lands of inferior
people. He further says that imperialism is the theory and
practice as well as the attitudes of a dominating
metropolitan center ruling a remote territory. In this
respect, Said adds that colonialism is almost always a
result of imperialism by the implantation of settlements on
distant territories [5].

Methodology: Things Fall Apart consists of three parts.
The article will explore these parts in relation to details
that project essential ideologies, rituals and practices that
helped shape the narrative, characterization and themes in
the entire story. The first part is set in Umuofia and it
focuses on the life of the people before the arrival of the
white colonial masters. The society here plays a vital role
in the lives of the people. The society which is tribal,
communal as well as religious is a source of inspiration for
the natives. The society values individual achievements
like that of Okonkwo, who is a great warrior that had slain
five men in battle, who happens to be the best wrestler in
Umuofia and who, is a successful farmer with three wives.
In actuality, he was among the nine ancestral voices that
governed Umuofia, which is a mark of great recognition
and outstanding distinction.

The second part focuses on how members of the
society ought to observe the instructions of the gods and
goddesses of Igbo without questioning or reconsideration. But when the Priestess of Agbala comes
to claim Okonkwo’s daughter in accordance with the
Oracle of the Hills and Caves, Okonkow rejects. So in this
part, special attention is given to the banishment of
Okonkwo to Mbata due to the terrible offence that he
had committed against Ani, the earth goddess. This
part also offers, on one hand, an insight into the
coming of the colonists with their churches and commerce
and on the other, the effects on the mode of the peoples’
lives. The third part is based on the return of Okonkwo to
his father’s land, his imprisonment and eventually, his
death.

In “Socio-Cultural Commitment in Things Fall Apart”,
Bamisile Sunday Adetunji thinks that Things Fall Apart is
a novel written with the objective of recasting the
stereotypical images of Africa by some biased writers and
colonial theorists who have limited knowledge of Africa
by the presentation of the particular instance of Nigeria
under colonialism [6]. For instance, Achebe was aware of
the destructive image of Africa that is presented in works
such as Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness in which
Africans are portrayed as backward, primitive,
subordinate and even savage. This implicitly justifies
conquering Africa, which is depicted in a manner that
requires being controlled by the white “refined” man.

In Heart of Darkness, the Europeans perceive the
natives as inferior. What Conrad is trying to do in the
novel is to implicitly criticize imperialism, but he cannot
explicitly state that since he would be swimming against
the current of his time. It is as if Conrad is saying that
these natives have no history, no accumulation of culture
and no heritage. But is this an enough reason to be
occupied? In addition, Conrad does not show these
natives expressing any kind of resistance. So he makes
nature more able to resist than the natives themselves. In
other words, he shifts the resistance from the human to
the non-human.
In accordance with this portrayal, natives are depicted to be passive and reticent with the lack of action against imperialism. In contrast, Achebe tries to show that the natives are the opposite of Conrad’s portrayal since they have a great sense of belonging and attachment to their land by attempting to fight the invading white man as a cohesive entity that cherishes its cultural values and ethnic identity.

In this regard, Said points out that Achebe criticized Conrad, a racist who totally dehumanized Africa’s native population. Said says [7]:

In a celebrated essay Chinua Achebe criticizes Conrad’s racism, he either says nothing about or overrides the limitations placed on Conrad by the novel as an aesthetic form. On the other hand, Achebe shows that he understands how the form works when, in some of his own novels, he rewrites – painstakingly and with originality – Conrad.

Claire Kramsch says in Language and Culture that language is bound up with culture in complex and multiple ways as facts, events and ideas are communicable. Consequently, language expresses cultural reality because words reflect their authors’ beliefs, attitudes as well as their point of view about any affair [8]. Through Things Fall Apart, Achebe celebrates and promotes the past ideologies, beliefs, customs and traditions of the natives’ forefathers. His work serves as an educative instrument that reveals and introduces the rich cultural heritage of the African past. It also refutes the erroneous allegations made on the part of some ignorant European writers and critics about the African continent and its people.

As a central player in terms of cultural commitment, Achebe stresses the importance of educating African people about their glorious past and creating awareness of the “other” on topics relating to his cultural heritage. This is his guiding principle in Things Fall Apart as he is blunt and sincere pertaining to what he believes to be the duties of a writer in Africa with a true sense of belonging.

This other used all kinds of discourses to justify its existence in Africa. A number of these discourses were, for instance, to spread civilization among primitive and backward natives as well as to restore order in their countries. Another pretext is that such “naïve” people lived in a state of chaos. In other terms, ready-made clichés and reductive stereotypes were adopted to fabricate the other’s discourse. These discourses were viewed as truthful accounts of the reality that the other orchestrated. But in reference to Michel Foucault’s Power, these truthful accounts are in a constant and endless cycle of change due to the engulfing existent circumstances that are exploited to serve the interests of the dominating other [9].

In Things Fall Apart, Achebe meant to represent the counter image of Africa by showing that the tribe, which is the basic unit of construction in their society, tenaciously observes order. He attempts to portray how individuals have morals, how they communicate through poetry and how they recognize and appreciate audacious traits such as courage and bravery. Achebe, in this regard, strives to show that the African society is not allegedly helpless, naïve, or in a presumed state of chaos but rather somewhat refined, organized and harmonious.

It is evident that the interference of the white man in the African society is not welcome by the natives. The Africans form a nation that is both aware and proud of its own heritage. As a result, the very different ideologies brought to Africa by the Europeans are totally rejected especially by the older generation that strived to establish their status in society. To illustrate [10]:

Suppose when he died all his male children decided to follow Nwoye’s steps and abandon their ancestors? Okonkwo felt a cold shudder run through him at the terrible prospects, like the prospect of annihilation. He saw himself and his fathers crowding round their ancestral shrine waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice and finding nothing but ashes of bygone days and his children the while praying to the white man’s god. If such a thing were ever to happen, he, Okonkwo, would wipe them off the face of the earth.

However, the white man attempts on spreading colonization in not only explicit but also implicit approaches through, for instance, religion. In the story, colonization and Christianity come hand in hand in the sense that Christianity is portrayed to forward the concept of salvation. It implies that people are living in the dark and are in need of enlightenment. In actuality, this is one of the West’s discourses to practice imperialism on people whom they consider inferior. Achebe states in the novel [11]:

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary.
Then he relevantly declares in another location [12]:

The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have never fallen apart.

That is why as soon as Nwoye converts to Christianity, he ceases to be Okonkwo’s son and even though Okonkwo perceives Nwoye as dead, Nwoye becomes a source of continuous disgrace and humiliation for the entire family. The novel portrays the initiation of the disunity and disintegration in the communal life of the African people even among the same family as illustrated in the aggravated relationship between Okonkwo and Nwoye. Achebe demonstrates this matter by depicting the day-to-day activities of the community and the mode or nature of the relationship between individuals, villages and respective gods through the execution of social, cultural and religious rituals.

Achebe is a responsible writer toward his society. He is aware of certain social and cultural obligations, which he attempts on fulfilling. He states in “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” in African Writers on African Writings that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans and that their societies were not mindless. On the contrary, African people had poetry and above all, they had a dignity that they must now regain. Achebe elaborates that the worst thing that can happen to any nation is the loss of their dignity and self respect. As a result, he believes that here is where the writer ought to intervene in the sense that it is the writer’s duty to help the nation in regaining what it had lost [13]. Therefore, he is not a mere member of that society, but rather an explorer of experiences in an artistic manner. He uses his creativity to interpret his views and ideas on the state of affairs in his society. To illustrates:

It was an occasion for giving thanks to Ani, the earth goddess and the source of all fertility. Ani played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity. She was the ultimate judge of morality and conduct. And what was more, she was in close communion with the departed fathers of the clan whose bodies had been committed to earth [14].

This passage sheds light on essential fundamentals in the Igbo society that paves the way to its relative sophistication and cohesion. To start with, it illustrates how the people are very attached to their deities and that certain rituals. It exemplifies that particular practices are performed to please these deities in order to be constantly blessed. It shows how this society observes morality and conduct and that each individual is judged by mainly these two categories. It illustrates how the clan for the people is of ultimate importance since it is the cornerstone of the whole society and its obedience is a necessity that is always to be respected, observed and implemented. It also shows how these people have great respect for their ancestors and that they are tenacious of their land that they harvest and from which they survive as a nation.

It is clear that Achebe tries to relate vital ideologies about these people. He represents this organized society as a hierarchal one in accordance with justified principles such as achievement. He shows that this society is refined in respect to having rules of morality and conduct. Achebe attempts to show that the colonized Africans are not backward and savage with no sense of organization, discipline, or achievement as promoted by the colonizing Europeans.

Nonetheless, Achebe is a writer to be praised also for his neutrality. To explain, Achebe in Things Fall Apart does not only portray the good aspects of his community but also some of the negative habits; such as the human sacrifice of Ikemefuna, the supernatural beliefs and superstitions such as throwing twins into the forest of evil and the excessive demonstration of manliness such as when the great warriors drink publically from the skulls of those whom they have slain.

Other double-standards could be depicted in the Igbo society at large. For instance, even though it is a male dominated one, its highest and strongest form of deity is a female goddess which is Ani. Moreover, the Igbo society is both communal and individualistic at the same time. The society is seen as a unified entity at times of joy and sorrow. But at the same time, it is stated that one makes his own reputation despite that of his ancestors as is the case of the status of Okonkow and his father in society. This shows that Achebe is an objective writer after all, who is trying to forward his ideas in a realistic manner.

Things Fall Apart highlights themes of clash of cultures, love and solidarity among the African people of the Igbo society. Achebe also demonstrates that the clash between the traditional and Western culture resulted in two major tragedies in the story. The first is that of Okonkwo, who violates the observed code of conduct and is, therefore, banned and somehow cursed. The second is a communal tragedy illustrated in the invasion of the white man, which resulted in the destruction of the entire village’s customs and traditions.
Things Fall Apart comes to an end with a tragic incident of execution. It shows how everything in society does fall apart once the other intrudes on the cultural privacy of a nation. This, in turns, may pave the way for both rejection and resistance as foreign interference is not welcome. In this respect, Said states that the arrival of the white man in the non-European world brought forth nearly everywhere he conquered some kind of resistance [15].

Things Fall Apart is a narrative of ideological and cultural investigation of raising awareness of the consequences of imperialistic politics on minor cultures. The motif of the novel is a clash of cultures along with its destructive social and psychological consequences on the African people. In fact, Achebe presents in Things Fall Apart an image of a rich cultural heritage and social stability. This illustrates his socio-cultural commitment as a writer in promoting African cultural values as different but not inferior to those of the imperialist white man. This, in its turn, implies that these cultural values should have been celebrated rather than brutally repressed.

CONCLUSION

This is conducted by focusing upon the status which Achebe occupies in African literature and how such a novel is a means on his part to write back. It shows how the "subalterns" have attained a voice that will finally be heard. Therefore, the objective of this article is to shed light upon essential ideologies, rituals and practices that helped shape the narrative, characterization and themes in the story as a whole in order to refute a discourse imposed by the "other".

REFERENCES