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Ethics of Igbo Community in Chinua Achebe's Novel *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe is a writer of the Post-Colonial era. Achebe, a major exponent of African literature, has been successful in placing Africa, its culture and literature in the world map. African fiction emerges as a kind of reaction to the Eurocentric version of Africa portrayed in terms of 'a savage' inhabiting 'a dark continent'. Achebe's first novel, Things Fall Apart (1958) is an excellent piece of work. In this novel, he indicates the facts that Igbo community has its own way of life, philosophy, set of values rules and beliefs. The superstition and rigidity of the Igbo people may not appeal to relevance which cannot be refuted. Okonkwo seems to be an apt example of Igbo man, he is an embodiment and staunch follower of Igbo culture, but he lacks the comprehensive understanding of its ethics. This research paper analyses how Achebe teaches us that there is a real balance between what we believe and what Igbo culture teaches. There must be some middle ground where women and men can exist and excel as equals.

Keywords: Ethics, Igbo community post-colonial, dark continent, primitivism, suppression, superstition, savage,

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Introduction

Chinua Achebe is a writer of the Post-Colonial era. He is an established African literature as per the emerging genre in the world literature. Achebe, a major exponent of African literature, has been successful in placing Africa, its culture and literature in the world map. African novel has been able to establish a tradition and an aesthetic sense of its own in a short span of time.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is an excellent work. Achebe describes the true picture of the Africans in the form of fiction. He makes an effort to enable the world understand 'Igbo' society and its ethics in true sense. He indicates the facts that Igbo community has its own way of life, philosophy, set of values, rules and beliefs in the novel. The superstition of the Igbo people may not appeal to relevance which cannot be refuted. This has enabled him to recreate the past glory of Africa and establish its worth among the Africans and the people of the Western world.

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Achebe's commitment shows the Western world and his own world in *Things Fall Apart*. Igbo traditional society is delineated by Achebe in the novel. The novel favours no individualism. It gives freedom to an individual to grow, but this freedom is only to that extent that it does not harm the community. Individual is a part of the social pattern and therefore has to contribute to society for its betterment. On the other hand, society is there to stand by his side when he needs.

Okonkwo is the protagonist of the novel. He grows in life because of that freedom of his society that appreciated and encouraged him to do hard work and to have determination to rise in position. This does not mean that Okonkwo had all the freedom. Like any established high social order, Igbo social set up also controls the individual from violating the law of the land and let them attain self growth and understand the community. It favours the freedom that pursuits own good in their own way, so long as an individual do not hinders the community and its laws.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe focuses on Igbo community and it seems to be a well civilized, far from primitivism, coherent and organized community like any Western civilization. Okonkwo has to repent his violation of laws in peace-week and his offering to 'Ani' the Earth Goddess, as repentance reflects the discipline loving

attitude of Igbo community.

Okonkwo seems to be an apt example of Igbo man. He is a good embodiment. He is staunch follower of Igbo culture. But he lacks the comprehensive understanding of its ethics. He ignores such ethics of his clan that leads to his tragic end in spite of his ability to grow rapidly. His clan seeks and respects the true Igbo ethics and culture, which Okonkwo has not been able to comprehend. Female importance in the clan and life is rejected by Okonkwo, but in his clan they have their dignified place like 'Ani', priestess etc.,

Okonkwo is in his exile for seven years at his maternal uncle's village. This shows the plight of women pervading in Igbo community. Uchendu is Okonkwo's uncle. He is true in explaining the reason of mother being supreme. His words are philosophic and worth understanding to know the importance of women in Igbo community. If Okonkwo understands this and such other true ethics of his clan, he might not have encountered his tragic end.

Achebe does not only reflect on the true spirit of Igbo community by exploring its glorious past, he is also concerned with the abolition of the evils prevalent in it so that it can stand erect with pride. Achebe shows Okonkwo's relationship with the values of the society. The killing of Ikemefuna draws attention of the readers to the novel's central concern about the tie between an individual and the community in the Igbo society. The author has made an honest attempt to show the real African culture with its good as well as evil aspects. It is so because he wants to reform the prevalent evils.

Achebe is concerned with projecting the fact that what Africa in general and Igbo society in particular possess is not understood by the European. Okonkwo and Obierika's make a conversation on the matter of a dispute of a land solved by Whiteman. "Does the Whiteman understand our custom about land?" "How can he when does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad" (160). It reflects the fact that Europeans have no knowledge of the Igbo culture; therefore they should not have disturbed their life. Their values, pattern of life, mode of living everything is unknown to the Europeans as they don't understand European life style. Ajofia, one of the elders of Umuofia is also true in saying:

We cannot leave the matter in his hands because he does not understand our customs, just as we do not understand his. We say he is foolish because he does not know our ways and perhaps he says we are foolish because we do not know his. (172)

Things Fall Apart describes perfectly about Okonkwo and his village. Okonkwo's life falls apart and as a result, he commits suicide by hanging himself. The cultural tradition of Umuofia falls apart, and becomes influenced by the West. *Things Fall Apart*, a novel by Chinua Achebe where he tells two different stories at the same time. Achebe uses Okonkwo and the villages falling out to show how African culture, as well as other cultures

around the world, suffered as a result of Westernization. Achebe focuses mainly on the character of Okonkwo. Okonkwo's story follows the general pattern of a Greek tragedy.

Achebe experiences many successes in the beginning of the novel. His early life is the typical successful story. He starts as a poor man, but he works hard to earn everyone's respect. He is disgusted with his father. Because his father is a lazy old man who borrows money and never pays it back. Okonkwo realizes that he does not want to be like his father, and it is this hatred that drives him to work hard.

Okonkwo pays off his debts and starts his long journey to the top of the clan after his father's death. Okonkwo becomes one of the villages' most respected members. He earns three out of the four village titles. He is recognized as the greatest warrior in Umuofia. He takes three wives and has many children. He is almost at the top of the clan when his journey to greatness starts to crumble.

A wealthy man can have nine wives and thirty children in Igbo. Okonkwo has three wives and eight children. The custom is very different from Western. The custom is practiced in the connected nine villages of Umuofia. In fact, a man's wealth is partially measured by the number of wives he has.

Western culture does not practice the ritual of sacrifice; most western religions look down upon living sacrifices. Judaism, a religion that used to practice sacrifices, has now opted to remove the ritual from its teachings in favor of a non-violent rite. Hayden White wrote in his book *The Content of the Form*: "Those who do not enter history as makers enter as the victims of the makers" (56). Frantz Fanon has severe problem with White's notion and he worked it in this way: "It is not the history of the plundered country that they made, but the history of the mother country" (40). Other western religions have never sacrificed animals to their gods. In most states, killing an animal sacrificially would violate animal cruelty laws, which would make animal sacrifices illegal in most of the U.S.

The religion bothered and hurt many clan members, and aided their conversion to Christianity. Twins often leave the religions of Umuofia for Christianity. Christianity offers them a spot in society when they will otherwise be hated. The western religions seem to offer the Umuofian people comfort and acceptances in a place where they would be disliked and treated badly. The western religion offers acceptance and love when the Umuofian religions offer banishment, and hate. M.P.Ganesan and B.Charanya Observe: "The aim of the post colonial writers is to bring to light the effects of the colonialism on the colonized through the destructive political, economic and cultural ideologies imposed on the innocent people" (Exploitation_Of_Labour_Class_People_In_Badal_Sirca_r's_Procession.)

Their religious beliefs dictate many customs and rituals including communal ceremonies. These take place in the evenings once the sun becomes dull. It is clear when

the ceremony is for men by the way that the crowd stands or sits. Even if there are many women, they are forced to stand off to the sides like outsiders. The titled men sit on stools while they wait for the trials to begin.

This religious rite seems to be like one performed by the American Indians. This ritual would not be done by anyone in today's society. No western religions practice customs as frightening. Okonkwo has done well in his life and earned a dominant role in Umuofia. He has three wives with many children and he is a successful farmer of yams. Yams were important because they “stood for manliness, and he who could feed his family from one harvest to another was a very great man indeed” (33).

Okonkwo shows the qualities of a man strength, courage, and wealth; he could not be challenged by someone of lesser position. In one village meeting a man contradicted Okonkwo. Okonkwo knows that calling a man or a woman would break his feelings of self-worth and value. Okonkwo's comment also seems to show that all men in Umuofia would be insulted if they are called women. Most of the men of Umuofia seem to hold the same ideals that Okonkwo has those women are placed here to be objects and trophies, not for companionship and comfort. Professor Ato Quayson points out:

Postcolonialism often also involves the discussion of experiences such as slavery, migration, suppression and resistance, difference, race, gender and place as well as responses to the discourses of imperial Europe such as history, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The term is as much about conditions under imperialism and colonialism proper, as about conditions coming after the historical end of colonialism. A growing concern among postcolonial critics has also been with racial minorities in the west, embracing Native and African Americans in the US, British Asians and African Caribbeans in the UK and Aborigines in Australia and Canada, among others. (what-is-postcolonial-literature)

The women of Umuofia are treated very poorly. Women are required to cook, clean and take care of the children. If these duties are not taken care of the women of Umuofia can be beaten. The Ibo tribe not only allowed, but encouraged wife beating. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* describes beatings on a few occurrences. American women are quickly becoming viewed more like men. They are out in the work place in force, and are even on the front lines in war time. Western society has slowly but surely incorporated women in the work place and raised the standard of equality. Such actions would never be allowed in Umuofia.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* brings to light the great cultural differences found in Western society and African society. Most of the differences in the religion and the role of the male or female in Umuofia would not be

easily accepted here in America. Achebe teaches us that there is a real balance between what we believe and what Igbo culture teaches. There must be some middle ground where women and men can exist, and excel, as equals. Until we are able to accept our weakness, and treat one another as equals we will all end up like Okonkwo.

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