

Things Fall Apart

Chinua Achebe

Model questions and answer

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***Things Fall Apart* as a tragedy with Okonkwo as the protagonist**

Postcolonial literature offers different viewpoints on the analysis of academic discourses about the former colonized countries. It discloses mainly the human condition on socio-political, economic, historical grounds. It also highlights the grounds that caused the deprivation, subjugation and predicament of colonized and newly independent people. Often postcolonial literature provokes to revive the traditional, primitive culture and custom of the colonized country. Literature from African countries is a suitable instance in this regard that discloses the 'up and down' pattern of various African countries from cultural and political stand points. On the discussion of African literature Chinua Achebe is the most prominent and celebrated name who had highly contributed in its development.

Things Fall Apart (1958) is the masterpiece of Chinua Achebe that was written on Nigerian background. It primarily deals with the conflict between the traditional culture of Nigerian Igbo community and the interference of European colonial power upon it.

It showed the downfall of the traditional Igbo culture and custom presenting Okonkwo as the protagonist of the text. The title of the novel indicates that it is the narration of someone's tragic fall or departure from a position. The title is taken from The Second Coming of W.B. Yeats whereas four lines from the poem are mentioned on the beginning page of the novel:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon can't bear the falconer

Things fall Apart, the centre cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

Through the above mention third line the disruption and disintegration of the primitive format is shown by an external power. From textual analysis it can be understood as the disruption of traditional Nigerian culture by the British missionary interference. In the very beginning of the novel the Igbo people believed in the conventions whereas the supreme god was Chukwu and other gods were his assistants. People respected them and were ready to sacrifice themselves. However, superstition was the central point of such customs.

The representative of Igbo society was the tragic figure Okonkwo who can be called a tragic hero as per the theory of Aristotle. As per the theory of Aristotle, a tragic hero is a person of high status who possesses a flaw or 'hamartia.' Okonkwo was a man of grand fame in his and other villages. He was invincible in wrestling from the villages Umofia to Mbanta. He was considered as the greatest hero from the origin of the village. He became so in spite of taking birth in a humble family. He was conscious for his family including wives and children. He protected the villagers as their glorious leader. Not only as a wrestler but Okonkwo was a man of great virtue. However, in every tragedy, the tragic figure due to flaw or hubris has to face downfall. It plays important role in the development of the character.

The same is applicable to Okonkwo. He was a man of hard working that made him famous. It was not his flaw that he feared to work but his fear towards failure and weakness that he found in his father. In this regard it is narrated in the novel that "...his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and weakness....It was not external but lay deep within himself, lest he should be found to resemble to his father." Okonkwo's father known as a lazy, carefree, poor man. He couldn't suggest his son what was right or wrong. So Okonkwo thought that a virtuous person would possess the qualities opposite of his father. It causes the degradation of his relationship with family members including son Nwoye. He said in the novel that "No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and his children...he was not really a man." In this regard he lost control over family, village and overall himself.

Ikemefuna was the son of a murderer of Mbaino village who was kept in the house of Okonkwo who was to be executed after three years. In those days he was as dear to Okonkwo as his son. In spite of having fondness to him Okonkwo didn't publicly disclose the same that was his fault. When Ikemefuna was to be executed Okonkwo as the leader of his clan participated in the execution process. He did not attempt to provoke it that took important role in his downfall. His situation can be compared The Rime of The Ancient Mariner of S.T.Coleridge whereas the mariner faced tragic consequences as he killed the albatross. The consequence of killing Ikemefuna was faced by Okonkwo and the entire village. It indicates the lack of mental balance of Okonkwo. From this point, abomination had been germinated in the mind of Okonkwo's son Nwoye towards his father and their customs. It shows the hollowness of Nigerian religion, culture, rituals and asserted the need of arrival of something new. For the death of Ikemefuna attraction towards universal brotherhood of Christianity had been apparent. People were in search of peace in Christian hymns.

The tragic happenings had been started for Okonkwo when after seven years he returned to Umuofia and realized that he didn't occupy the respected position as earlier. He was not in position to lead nine villagers who then joined to the Christians. It was impossible for him to regain the previous prestige and glory. However, as a man of tradition he was intended to continue the traditional believes and customs. But the villagers including his son didn't take his side. On this point Okonkwo was prepared to face the tragedy. He was under the jail custody of the Christians and was highly tormented by them and was released only after the villager made the payment of fine. After killing one of Europeans, Okonkwo committed suicide with a broken heart. The tragedy of Okonkwo fills the heart of the reader with pity than ended with catharsis. In this regard the remark of Obierika in the novel is remarkable that " That was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself; and now he will be buried like a dog." However, Things Fall Apart cannot be called a tragic only for Okonkwo. This is the defeat of the tradition of Igbo society as well. It shows the hollowness and gaps in their customs. The European colonial politics had smashed the organic, loyal and strong mentality of Igbo people. Their entire system was broken down and became the victim of colonization and imperialism. Their governance was started to be controlled by the colonizers and they became unable to decide their futures. The death of Okonkwo signifies dual ending, the defeat of Okonkwo and the entire village.

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The African rural society in *Things Fall Apart*

In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Chinua Achebe had special attention on indigenous culture. In this regard his conception is akin to Edward Said who said in *Orientalism* that “The orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” Achebe attempted to depict that Nigeria was not mere a European invention at all. He depicted the authentic description of Igbo culture in *Things Fall Apart*. He did so from Nigerian viewpoints delineating the time from colonial to postcolonial period. There is resistance against the western perception of colonies that treated the Africans as ‘other’ from European perspective. Achebe tried to show the authentic history of the Nigerians.

The religious customs of the Igbo is to be mentioned first. They believed in oracles from their ancestors. He could consult with the oracle on any crisis. Even oracle had role in judiciary system. The most respected was Aro oracle who offered suggestion on business

purposes. The residence of oracle was treated as a forbidden place. Even seeing the oracle indicated death in Igbo system. Only the chief priest could see oracle who was the representative of that power. Denying the priest was treated as the denial of God. Even he could demand any gift or sacrifice from the public. The villagers of nine villages respected the oracle of hills or caves. There was system of heavy physical punishment for the violators of such oracles. Chiela was the priest of Agbala, the oracle of hills and caves. Chiela became a goddess when the spirit of Agbala took her. In Igbo belief Chukwu was the lord of the world, the supreme God. There were several gods and goddesses to help him. The Igbo people thought that all in the world were the creation of Chukwu. The Igbo people decided the name of children by his names. Another respected deity was Ani who was the Mother Nature, the goddess of fertility. It was believed that the virtuous men got shelter to her after death. She doesn't offer her place to a person who had committed suicide or died with shame. The people for her honour celebrate New Yam each year. The existence of Satan is also found in Igbo religion who lead people towards sin having several black representatives including death. Ekwensu was responsible for unnatural or strange death of people.

The social structure of Igbo system is to be mentioned also. It offered title based on the family success and personal success. It is highly respectful for them. The children were grown up learning the value of title, marriage and property. However, handsome fee was to be paid in order to get a title along with personal excellence. The persons holding junior title were considered as inferior in society. They were buried in a very simple way. The higher title was 'ozo' for the respected persons. Ichi-echichi was the title of immortality and god like respect and was considered as the divine figure. There was system of forming group of boys by same age like Biafarm, Ogbo Aye Biafra, Ogboinfunza etc. The members of junior groups did the works like cleaning the roads and related works. The members of senior groups

executed the judicial duties. They decided war, peace and punishment. Even women were considered as inferior in comparison with the men.

Achebe along with celebrating the Igbo society also mentioned its limitations. Their behaviours seemed to be unethical for their prejudices. The parents forbade their children not to whistle in night in the fear of evil spirits. The swelling of belly was considered as the abomination of the goddess of land. Even the sick peoples suffering from diseases were not allowed to die in home but in forest. As it was considered as a death by the abomination of goddess of land such dead bodies were not buried. The Umofian people celebrated week of peace each year for getting the blessings from goddess Ani. But no one had to commit any sin or mistake in this time. Okonkwo beats his wife in this week and he was condemned by Ezeani that “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.” As the atonement Okonkwo was instructed to offer a goat, a hen, cloth, one hundred cowry to goddess Ani. The people of Umofia believed in omen and ill omen. A bad omen was twitching of eye lid. Even the Igbo people feared in giving reply to a call by their names. It is mentioned in the text “That was the way people answered calls from outside. They never answered yes for fear, it might be an evil spirit calling.” The old silk trees were considered as something sacred for bearing the spirit of good children. However, for such believes the Igbo people became ignorant and cruel. The twin children were thrown into the forest considering as inauspicious, Ekwefi, the second wife of Okonkwo was considered as unlucky as none of her children lasted long. It was also believed that an evil spirit entered in her womb. For this prejudice her dead children were not buried but mutilated and were thrown into the forest.

Along with the religious prejudices, instances of brutality are to be mentioned. The execution of Ikemefuna is notable who was a dear person to Okonkwo. Another terrible

incident happened when one night Chielo demanded the daughter of Okonkwo for Agbala. Chielo threatened to the hesitating parents saying that “Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a God speaks? Beware!” Then the helpless parents offered the daughter to her hand. However such rituals were considered as a connecting link with the ancestors as it is mentioned in the text that “ A man’s life from birth to death, was considered a series of transition rites, which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors.”

Here it is to be mentioned that the indigenous customs held the unity of the Igbo people. However, the situation was getting changed from the second half of the novel due to arrival of the Christian missionaries. It had impact upon the Igbo people and their tradition got shattered by this. Though in the initial stage this impact was confined within religious purposes but in the later stage other arenas of life got dominated by it. Nwoye, the son of Okonkwo was first attracted to Christian religion. The Christians were able to seduce the local persons that the Igbo deities were inferior in comparison with of Christianity. They founded church, school for public services but the intention was political. However, they were able to show the hollowness of the Igbo conventions. The judicial system was modernized by the European intervention. The conditions of law and orders of District Commissioner took the place of prominence of Oracle and Agbala. They promised to give punishment to the criminals for the safety of the public. However, a sense of colonial domination is apparent in the speech of the Commissioner that “ We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen.” Here the conception of Igbo oracle was found to be meaningless. Even the Igbo people were governed by the western law. In daily life style a conflict was apparent between the traditional and newly arrived conceptions. Several changes had been apparent whereas horse was replaced by cycle, even new cloths, shoe, spectacle were apparent. Even the entire Igbo pattern was modified by western set up. Actually the Igbo people were not properly

conscious about the Europeans and not knew how to react with them. It helped the Europeans to turn some natives into their followers with the tantalization of civilization. Due to some sort of ignorance, disorientation, superstition, brutality the Igbo people couldn't challenge the Europeans. In order to save themselves from the brutality of indigenous system they accepted the Europeans that caused their colonization, another mode of victimization.