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SOCIO-CULTURAL AWARENESS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND *NO LONGER AT EASE*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe writes against a particular historical tradition and a national context to present his point of view as a novelist. His novels achieve universality through a sensitive interpretation of socio-cultural situations of Igbo community. Achebe uses his African background to explore the human conditions of pride and power, defeat and dejection, love and loss. Though firmly set in Africa, his novels have a universal appeal. Achebe claims to be an insider to the Igbo world and a recorder of the cultural history of his people. Achebe shows that in Igbo system nothing is absolute, and anything and everyone is counterbalanced with the consciousness of the community. The tradition and socio-cultural spaces enable to achieve a balance and continuity in Igbo life. The present paper aims to show socio-cultural awareness in Achebe's novels *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*.

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The people of Igbo community are one of the three largest ethnic groups in south-eastern Nigeria. The Igbo people constitute about twenty percent of the total Nigerian population. The other two important communities are Hausa and Yoruba. The Igbo live on the western part of river Niger which consists of Illah, Asaba, Alenso and Abah as main places. On the eastern part of the river Niger the main places are Nsukka, Onistha, Awka, Ogidi, Igbo, Ukwu, Obasi, Umuahia, Owerri, Aba and Port Harcourt. Collectively these places are called Igbo land. The Igbo people speak Igbo which includes almost 200 dialects and a majority of them speak English alongside Igbo. Before the colonial disturbance the Igbo people were fragmented groups. There were various groups set according to clan, lineage, village affiliation and dialect. Before the colonialism the Igbo people lacked a strong sense of identity. They were involved in inter-tribe

or inter-clan conflicts and war was common at those times. Under the influence of Chinua Achebe and other African writers and intellectuals, a strong sense of Igbo identity developed which was fuelled by the colonial situation of the mid 20th century. There were certain conflicts with other Nigerian ethnic groups. Later the Igbo people tried very hard to create the independent state of Biafra. After some time the Nigerian war of Biafra broke out. This was a failure and the Igbo-dominated Republic Biafra was reabsorbed back into Nigeria. Chinua Achebe was an active participant in the Biafran war. The politics of Nigeria resulted in the failure of civil governance, the rise of military dictatorships after the independence of the Nigerian nation from British colonial rule in 1960. The legacy of colonialism and colonial rule has played a very important part in the rapid disintegration and dislocation of the Igbo people. All these cultural and historical backgrounds

had been given a fictional touch by the novelist Chinua Achebe. This is the reason that Achebe calls his narratives as 'applied art as distinct from pure.' Culture includes the customs and beliefs, art, way of life and social organizations of a particular country or group. Nigeria, along with Gambia, Benin, Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and Togo constitute West Africa. This region is one of the ancient cultural regions of the world. In *Journey Through Ancient Civilizations (1992)*, Roger Coote observes:

One of the most important events in the development of the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa was the manufacture of iron, which began there in around 600 B.C. In most other civilizations, copper and bronze had been made before iron working was discovered, but in Africa people seem to have gone straight from using stone to making iron ones. Iron working technology was probably brought from the Phoenician colonies on the North African Coast, rather than from Kush, and carried across the Sahara along trade routes from the Mediterranean. Among the first Africans to manufacture iron were the Nok people, who had lived in what is now the West African State of Nigeria since about 900 B.C. Among the few remains of Nok culture is a number of terracotta heads, some of which are life sized and were clearly modelled on real people. They were probably used for religious rituals. (48)

In the beginning of nineteenth century. Europeans showed an active colonial interest in African countries. During the process of colonial rule the Igbo people were dominated politically and culturally. This disturbed the social and economic setting of native people who were deeply rooted with their traditional culture. Apart from colonial atrocities the African people did not kill their creative spirit. This was the main reason that the writers, artists and other intellectuals became more committed towards their creative works. The western world propagated Africa as 'Dark continent' and the Africans as 'non human'. The western world failed to perceive that the African people did not

need any western interventions and their so called acts of 'civilizing missions'. The colonizers went on to introduce their language, literature, law, institutions and literature to the African people but they ignored the facts of African rich oral tradition and African myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, and riddles. In *Morning Yet on Creation Day (1975)*, Achebe talks of the duties of an artist. Art should be for society's sake. Achebe writes:

Some time ago, in a very testy mood, I began a lecture with these words: *Art for art's sake is just another piece of deodorised dog-shit*. Today, and particularly in these sublime and hallowed precincts, I should be quite prepared to modify my language if not my opinion. In other words I will still insist that art is, and was always, in the service of man. Our ancestors created their myths and legends and told their stories for a human purpose (including, no doubt, the excitation of wonder and pure delight), they made their sculptures in wood to serve the needs of their times. Their artists lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the good of that society. (*Morning Yet On Creation Day 19*).

The folktale, another cultural heritage features human beings and animal's features human beings and animals which present moral values, wit and social commentary and instructions in Achebe's novels. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe presents many witty stories of masculinity, violence and bloodshed. There are tales of women and the story of tortoise and his ambition to fly in the sky, which faces tragic end for his cunningness with birds. There is another story of a bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat. These folktales are deeply rooted with Nigerian national cultural awareness. The songs are very deeply related with Igbo land and their culture. One can feel the sense of wit and humour in the song of marriage ceremony where Okonkwo is present. In *Things Fall Apart*, the song is such as:

' If I hold her hand
She says, " Don't touch!"
If I hold her foot
She says, "Don't touch!"
But when I hold her waist beads
She pretends not to know.' (84)

The Igbo people were very fond of personal achievements. Some Igbo men managed to get many titles, which enabled them to be acknowledged as great men or chiefs. Titled chiefs formed their own councils and represented the community to outsiders. Throughout Igbo land, a man who failed to progress beyond the most junior titles was a man without status in the eyes of his people. Whatever his age, the people of the community looked upon him as a boy. The man without appropriate titles lacked respect in his walks of life. Wrestling was very popular game throughout Igbo land. This led to the heroes of the community with great respect. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo was well known throughout seven villages. When he was 18 years old, he had thrown Amalinze, a great wrestler who could not be beaten in wrestling for seven years. The people beat drums and played upon their flutes over Okonkwo's victory. In the same novel there is a wrestling contest between Okafo and Ikezue. In the last attempt, Okafo was swept off his feet by his supporters and carried home shoulder high. The villagers sang his praise and the young women clapped out of joy. The crowd sang:

Who will wrestle for our village?
Okafo will wrestle for our village.
Has he thrown a hundred men?
He has thrown four hundred men.
Has he thrown a hundred cats?
He has thrown four hundred cats.
Then send him word to fight for us. (36)

The Igbo people believe in the strong sense of community and lineage rather than in the belief of self or individual. The Igbo live in autonomous villages and towns, ruled by their elders. The lineage groups proceed from father to son. Relationships were based on blood ties. Chinua Achebe is a writer who writes with his cultural experience and with national cultural awareness. C.L. Innes and Berth Lindfors talk of Achebe's concept of cultural recovery and cultural experience in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (1979). C.L. Innes writes:

Chinua Achebe is an apt choice in this regard, for the Nigerian's fiction demonstrates his preoccupation with language, not simply as a

communicative device, but as a total cultural experience. At this level, language is not merely technique. It is the embodiment of its civilization and therefore represents or dramatizes modes of perception within its cultural grouping. Accordingly, the white man's failure to understand African customs in *Things Fall Apart* is bound up with his ignorance of the African's language. In other words, Achebe seizes upon the perceptual values represented by an alien European Culture and its language, then exploits these criteria to portray external conflicts between the African and the white colonialist, or to project the internal crisis of African society. (24)

Achebe provides an insider but objective view of his people in order to put right the misjudged idea about them in the western media. Achebe is unaware of the democratic balance that *ozo* achieved and maintained. Achebe presents Igbo's divine idea based on *Ani*, the Earth goddess and about the compassion and care for living and dead. Igbo's have a social order. First a person belonged to the smallest social unit known as *Uno*, or house. This was a natural family, consisting of a man, his wife or wives, and their children

Thus Obi Okonkwo became the first candidate as to get scholarship from his clan's union. He was very good in his studies. He was a village celebrity. Obi's going to England for his further education created much stir in Igbo people. Before leaving for the city of Lagos there was a prayer meeting. The chairman of Anglican Church of Omuofia offered the prayer:

The people who sat in darkness
Saw a great light,
And to them which sat in the region
And shadow of death
To them did light spring up. (7)

During his education in Anglophone, Obi's conduct and behaviour changes. There is little in his life to show his tribal culture. Growing up in the new faith and his four years stay in England to pursue a degree in English literature exposed him to western culture which changed him forever. He faces conflict between his childhood impression of Lagos and the real situations of city life. When he returns from England and joins as an officer in the department of

scholarship, the artificialities of tribal life in cities is exposed. In his childhood obi Okonkwo had heard the stories of rich life and plenty of money in the city of Lagos. This is the reason that his mind has associated with Lagos with plenty of money, electric lights, cars club memberships and dance parties. In *Chinua Achebe (2010)*, Nahem Yousaf says, "Obi clings to the European literary imagination, though the oblique, poetically allusive (and pathetically elusive) images he chooses fail to illuminate Nigeria" (14).

Obi Okonkwo's stay in England greatly affected him to develop the individual self and to question the authority of his clan and parents over his life. Obi involves in those cultural values which meet his personal wants. It was in a night club that he meets Clara, an *Osu* (out caste, a person dedicated to the gods and a taboo for the free born to marry) girl pursuing nursing training. Away from his family and village Obi wants to enjoy all the joys of city. In *Achebe's world: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe (1976)*, Robert M. Wren talks of various kinds of conflicts which Obi faces in Lagos. Wren writes:

Put the opposite way, the paradox remains. If the African adopts the European code of resolute financial integrity (as, one supposes, Mr Green has done) he must at the same time support himself in the European mode of life. His salary is adequate for this and little more. If he has family obligations, he can attempt to meet them, but soon he must limit the extent of his responsibility to say, immediate family. But living as he must in (comparatively) great comfort and luxury, he cannot limit his family support so greatly that impoverished near relatives suffer privation. Nor can he deny the needs of clansmen in distress (or claims of clansmen to whom he is indebted, which is Obi's case). He must live with the fact that the life of his ancestors for ever on the edge of famine- is not acceptable to those who nurtured him to his prosperity, when they can see him in his splendour. (37)

Achebe's documentation and presentation of traditional Igbo society provides vivid dramatization of the characters psychology and the novel shows all the contradictory forces of internal conflict and colonial influence determine their destinies. Chinua Achebe has retrospective insight of

his society. He looks back at the past and tries to get a balanced view for many cultural and societal situations. He tries to find out what went wrong in the past and how the African people recreate the things again. This is the reason that the novelist provides alternative sets of traditions, ideal, values and behaviour while reclaiming his heritage and at the same time he has a sense of cultural awareness which provides directions for constructive changes. Achebe believes in the fact that every culture may it African or western has its merits and in his novels there is strong presence of community in place of western nation of individuality. He presents rich a cultural heritage, the democratic impulse and collective consciousness behind the village meetings and the meditation of disputes by village elders (umuanna), highlight the native democratic tradition of the Igbo people. In the book titled *Talking with African Writers (1990)*, edited by Jane Wilkinson, Chinua Achebe talks of writer's commitment and writer's duties as an artist. In this interview Achebe says:

It is at the root of the writer's being: his commitment to his vision of the world, to the truth as he understands it, including the truth of fiction, which is slightly different kind of truth from the truth you encounter when you are buying and selling; the commitment to the integrity of language, commitment to excellence in the use of your talent so that you don't tolerate from yourself, in your work, something that you know can be done better by a little more attention, by waiting, by some more patience. So it is commitment over a wide scope of things really. The writer, any artist, who defaults in this is betraying the nature of art. This is why it is so difficult for me to legislate from some kinds of people who cannot see the world in its complexity: The fanatics of all kinds, of right or left the fundamentals of all kinds. These people do not understand, they cannot possibly understand, the kind of commitment I'm talking about. They use the word 'commitment' more frequently than artists do and they use it so frequently that the word has become debased and is now in the service of fanaticism. That is not what I had in mind. It is not what I mean by commitment: not commitment to a narrow definition of the world, to narrow perception

of reality, to narrow view of politics or economics or anything, religion, race. One can become committed to any of these things, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about something quite different. When you are committed to, you are very different from the man who is not committed, say, to his religion. I cannot see an artist being a fanatical person in terms of religion; it seems to me to be quite contradictory. You may have artists who are good Churchmen, but if they are really good artists you will soon discover that they cannot be fanatical in their religion. The same goes for politics. What they are committed to is bigger, something of infinitely greater value than what church you go to, what race you belong to, What language you speak. (49)

For a good novelist or artist Achebe suggests the he or she be a good teacher for the society. Teacher not in ordinary sense who only prescribes for his or her students Achebe thinks of teachers and pioneers like Jesus Christ or Mohammed, Buddha or Plato. A good pioneer or teacher is a person who never prescribes; he draws out. Real education for Achebe is a drawing out what is there, leading out, helping the readers to discover... explore. In the book *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (1994), Edward W. Said talks of the role of intellectuals in the society. The intellectuals work for liberation of the brutalities of the powers and abuses of the powers. Edward W. Said suggests:

The fundamental problem is therefore how to reconcile one's identity and the actualities of one's own culture, society, and history to the reality of other identities, cultures, peoples. This can never be done simply by asserting one's preference for what is already one's own: tub-thumping about the glories of 'our' culture or the triumphs of 'our' history is not worthy of the intellectual's energy, especially not today when so many societies are comprised of different races and backgrounds as to resist and reductive formulas. As I have tried to show here, the public realm in which intellectuals make their representations is extremely complex, and contains uncomfortable features, but the meaning of an effective intervention in that realm has to rest on the intellectuals unbudgeable

conviction in a concept of justice and fairness that allows for difference between nations and individuals, without at the same time assigning them to hidden hierarchies, preferences, evaluations. Everyone today professes a liberal language of Equality and Harmony for all. The problem for the intellectual is to bring these nations to bear on actual situations where the gap between the profession of equality and justice, on the one hand, and the rather less edifying, reality, on the other, is very great. (69)

Achebe shows that Igbo people maintain a balance where change is expected and where man's existence is interrelated with the material and spiritual. If there is any lack of balance it is again maintained or put right by certain rituals, sacrifices or by an appeal to the ancestors. The Igbo world is made up *Uwa* (representing the visible world of human beings, forests and animals), *Mmuo* (dead ancestors), *Alusi* (supernatural forces) and (personal god) is a kind of soul given by *Chukwu* (the supreme god), which determines the person's abilities and lot.

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