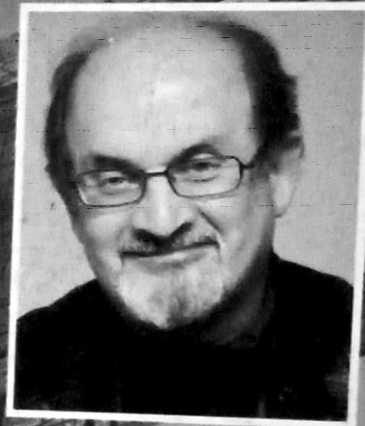


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The Politics of History in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Post Colonial criticism has highlighted the role of ideology in history. The historian is often shown to be in league with hidden ideologies. A result of this disclosure is the return to the sources with the motive either of revenge or revision. *Things Fall Apart* stands on its own as a critique both of colonial and postcolonial histories. Achebe writes with what may be called a kind of creative indifference. He is the omniscient native narrator who knows full well the minds of both the African and European characters. However, at many instances he refrains from giving any authorial commentary.

Nigeria became a free country in 1960. Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* was published two years earlier. The novel is admittedly a historical account of pre colonial Nigeria and the process of colonization. It is natural that the historian, in so far as, s/he is a colonial subject, loses his/her historical sense as s/he is manipulated by the historiography of the colonizer. A possible outcome is the strategic reversal of everything that the colonizer did. This paper aims at examining Achebe's reaction to the colonial as well as nationalist historiographies of Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart*. The study of history as a subject that is always under erasure, forced into endless revisions, is developed in the backdrop of what

Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin maintain in *The Empire Writes Back*

"...it is not possible to return to or to rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national or regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise."

The novel ends with an ironical but unproblematic mention of a Eurocentric discourse in the making: "The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of Lower Nigeria". The European District Commissioner finds in Okonkwo's death a very interesting story of anthropological interest for the readers back in Europe. It is important to note the noun and the adjective in the title of the book: 'pacification' and 'primitive' respectively. These two words are suggestive of an uncivilized and unruly race. That these people are very much in need of being taught by their European masters is without doubt what this book aims at saying and justifying. The situation is reminiscent of Kurtz's astounding remark at the end of his treatise in *Heart of Darkness*: "Exterminate the Brutes". This episode is an ironic commentary on the role that the European writer has arrogated for himself.

Having said that we also see how Achebe avoids glossing over inconvenient facts of the tribal society in Igboland. There are references to the irrational practice of throwing away of twins in the Igbo society. Furthermore, the medicine man mutilates the dead body of the 'Ogbanze' or the wicked child which is supposed to re-enter the mother's womb after its death to torment by dying again. And there are the 'Osus' or the out castes in the society. They are never allowed to marry. They can never be buried properly after death. Interestingly, the Osus are exploited by the people of the same clan who are intellectually superior. The latter call themselves the 'freeborn', probably because they own land and property. The freeborns advise the Osus that if they ever cut their hair they will die. They accept it as the truth. This simple fact shows how their ideology is packaged by a dominant group for its convenience.

With the coming of the European missionaries there is a shift in the centre of power but the packaging of ideology remains. The missionaries are on the look out for chinks in the tale of the tribe and they find it in their superstitious practices. The concept of organic community that the tribes used to represent is destroyed under colonial power.

The villagers are all farmers. As there is no artificial irrigation system they have to rely on rain. Naturally, they are inclined towards animism. But the new religion of the missionaries is more poetical than practical. As Achebe writes:

"It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated [Nwoey]. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow." (TFA p, 134)

Never the less the shamanic scenes like the search of Ezinma's "iyi-uwa" by Okagbue Uyanwa, the leading medicineman and the journey of Chielo to the shrine of "Agbala" in the faint moonlight are described in detail but with indifference. For the 'Osus' and the women who give birth to twins and triplets, Christianity becomes an escape route to freedom. Mr Brown, the missionary, cannot successfully argue with Akunna, a village elder, regarding religious beliefs and practices. Mr Brown says that there is one supreme God and the rest are all false gods. To this Akunna replies:

"We also believe in Him and call him Chukwu. He made all the world and the other gods" (p, 162)

And he further justifies:

"Your queen sends her messenger, the District Commisioner. He finds that he cannot do the work alone and so he appoints 'kotma' to help him. It is the same with God, or Chukwu. He appoints the smaller gods to help Him because His work is too great for one person. (p, 163)

Mr Brown understands that a 'frontal attack' on the clan's belief by the colonizers would not be possible. So the next option is education. The use of education as a tool of power is the theme of Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest: Literary Studies and British Rule in India* (1989). The education has a brainwashing effect on the natives. It teaches them to dishonour their own people and tradition and hail everything which is European. When arrested by the British District Commissioner by guile and hypocrisy, Okonkwo snarls in anger: "We should have killed whiteman if you had listened to me" (p, 176). A native who is the messenger of the District Commisioner reveals the impact of the British education:

'You are not satisfied with your crime, but you must kill the whiteman on top of it'. He carried a strong stick, and he hit each man a few blows on the head and back. Okonkwo was choked with hate. (p, 176)

To fight for one's cause becomes 'a crime'. The natives are taught that anything European is always right and anything non-European is criminal. And those who can accept this remain and those who cannot, die an ignominious death like that of Okwonko.

The European language creates turmoil in the Igbo society and aggravates the disintegration. Interestingly, however, it is with the same language with which the author presents the picture of the past. Incidentally, Achebe is one of the first graduates in English literature from Nigeria.

The Igbo society, using a term from the Eurocentric philosophical discourse, may be called democratic. There is no king or any single ruler. But there are the council of village elders, priests and the secret cult of the Egwugwu. Even people from very poor families can rise to high social positions in society. Okonkwo is such a person. Although Achebe is full of respect for the past tradition he does not ignore the plight of the outcastes - the Osus. And he does pay tribute to this missionary zeal with his narration:

'Before God', he said, 'there is no slave or free. We are all children of God and we must receive these our brothers. (p. 142-143)

Social problems are settled through negotiations. Shedding the blood of one's kinsmen is a terrible sin and the sinner cannot escape punishment. Even Okonkwo, a member of the Egwugwu, has to go to exile in Mabnta for seven years for killing the son of Ogbuefi Ezeudu by mistake. Its decision is always justified. Marriage is an important social ceremony. And the Egwuwu bench always ensures that the marital peace in the family is always upheld. Uzowulu is accused of wife beating by his in-laws. The matter is brought to the notice of the Egwugwu. What Evil Forest, the leader of the nine Egwugwu says is significant:

We have heard both sides of the case. Our duty is not to blame this man or to praise that, but to settle the dispute. (p. 84)

The matter is amicably settled. Oduke, the wife's brother, is asked by Evil Forest to allow his sister to go to her husband:

If your in-law brings wine to you, let your sister go with him. (p. 85)

Achebe, with all his regards for the Igbo marriage system, does leave a loose thread. Okonkwo's third wife Ekwefi is actually the wife of Anene. Later on she leaves her husband for Okonkwo. The author is silent about the aftermath of the incident.

Enoch, a convert and a fanatic does the unthinkable task of unmasking an Egwugwu. It is an unprecedented action. But even after such an event, the Egwugwu doesn't lose its rationality. It still remains secular, liberal and accommodating:

You can stay with us if like our ways. You can worship your own god. It is good that a man should worship the gods and the spirits of his fathers. Go back to your house so that you may not be hurt. Our anger is great but we have held it down so that we can talk to you.

(p. 172)

The European missionaries with 'the Whiteman's burden' came to preach the occidental idea of brotherhood. Ironically, they do not hesitate to fire at the unarmed villagers in the market. And in the process the whole village of Abame is wiped out. The innocent natives cannot see the nexus between religion and politics in the European camp. Religion is the platform upon which the European government is built. But a European is not really a necessary thing for the Africans. There is already a strong tradition of democracy and value based teachings encapsulated in proverbs. In fact many of the tribes talk only in proverbs in the public space.

In order to hold the clan together, the Igbo people have various festivals and ceremonies. 'The feast of the new yam' is one such. It is the celebrations of joy, life and vitality. A carnival atmosphere can be seen in the wrestling matches which are enjoyed by all, even by the women and the children. They believe in the idea of a healthy mind in a healthy body like the ancient Greeks who had their Olympics. Achebe gives a graphic description:

There were seven drums and they were arranged according to their sizes in a long wooden basket. There men beat them with sticks, working feverishly from one drum to another. They were possessed by the spirit of the drums. (p, 42)

And he further adds:

The crowd had surrounded and swallowed up the drummers, whose fanatic rhythm was no longer a mere disembodied sound but the very heart beat of the people. (p, 46)

Staying in exile at Mbanta Okonkwo is depressed. He forgets his duty. His uncle Uchendu tries to lift his spirit. Uchendu is almost like Buddha giving discourses on grief and Krishna teaching duty is 'Karma Yoga' (Shrimad Bhagwat Gita):

If you think you are the greatest sufferer in the world ask my daughter, Akueni, how many twins she has borne and thrown away.

Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland after seven years. But if you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you, they will all die in exile. (p, 122)

This similarity in the discursive styles of Buddha and Krishna on the one hand and of Uchendu and early Okonkwo on the other is not incidental. Buddha and Krishna are discursive powerhouses of the Orient. They sustain and strengthen myths and beliefs of what could be roughly called the Eastern world (though the irony should not be missed here). Achebe seems to be aware of the strategic rubbishing of Buddha, Krishna and the many African religions by the collusion between imperial power and Christianity. It must be marked that this collusion is neither obvious nor unilinear. So the intertextual reference to Buddha's direction to the woman who had lost her son and Krishna's exhortation to Arjuna in the battlefield are strategic interrogations of colonial power masquerading as knowledge.

It is obvious that Europeans brought materialism, consumerism, corruption and crime into the Igbo land. Palm - oil, which was at the centre of social life, becomes commercialized. Holding people to ransom and demanding bribes, hitherto unknown, become a part of the native life. Traditional medicine which has been the only to cure is now rejected. Everything which is European apparently produces quick results. Their medicine works quickly. One may here recall the way Okonkwo cured Ezinma's fever with the steam bath:

He took down the pot from the fire and placed it in front of the stool. He then roused Ezinma and placed her on the stool. He then roused Ezinma and placed her on the stool, astride the steaming pot. The thick mat was thrown over both. Ezinma struggled to escape from the choking and overpowering steam, but she was held down. She started to cry.

When the mat was last removed she was drenched in perspiration. Ekwefi mopped her with a piece of cloth and she lay down on a dry mat and was soon asleep. (p, 78)

The education system is designed in the European model so as to produce court messengers, court clerks, vineyards labourers and some teachers. These people in turn consolidate the Empire. It is important to note that Achebe gives a graphic description of the pre-colonial Igbo life with its customs and rituals but he never tries to justify the faith nor does he abhor it at any time. The fear associated with the will - o' - the - wisp 'ogbu-agali-odu' is left undisturbed:

[Ekwefi] remembered the night long ago, when she had seen ogbu-agali-odu, one of those evil essences loosed upon the world by the potent 'medicines' which the tribe had made in the distant past against its enemies but had now forgotten how to control. (p, 94)

Achebe uses Nwoye to bring up the humane or the feeling side of the native life. And there is Obierika who voices the rational and the thinking mind. It counterbalances the rigidity of Okonkwo's beliefs. But these potential thoughts never take a sure path of actions. It can not save the clan from disintegration.

The clan despite all misgivings remains true to its ideals till the end. Okonkwo breaks

the tradition by killing the messenger. It is an impulsive act and the elders can not approve of it. And so they do not participate in the killing. Okonkwo has genuine grievances but even than certain ideals are to be respected always and in any condition.

We know that Edward Said's Orientalism laid the foundation for a new wave of interest in colonialism and, by implication can be said to have founded Postcolonial criticism. This novel with its detail observations and peculiar silences not only critiques colonialism but also offers an advance warning against extreme form of Postcolonial revenge historiography. For, such extreme forms of revenge historiography can only end up in formulating exclusive and protectionist theories of culture.

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