

MYTHS AND SYMBOLS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S NOVELS

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Abstract

Literature can successfully forge a sense of identity in a society torn between the dominator and the dominated. It could be said that writing African literature in English encourages a similar self-identification. Achebe's Novels focus on the traditions and Myths of Igbo Society, the clash of western and traditional African values during and after the colonial era. His style relies heavily on the Igbo oral tradition and combines straight forward narration with representations of folk stories, proverbs and oratory. Male power appears as fundamental in the Igbo patriarchal society where "power is usually cited as the most important factor used by men to construct their own identities as the engendered representatives of humanity". That power is not only at the physical level, but also at that of society itself. At the level of society there is a "structural power" and which consists of a certain number of privileges given to the individual by the clan. There is a dialectical link between male power and honour. The sense of duty has led to the decline of the Igbo society identity. Set in Igboland towards the end of the nineteenth century, "Things fall Apart" is characterized by an imbrications of many themes among which quest for identity, male power, honour, the sense of duty, exile, clash of cultures, order and hierarchy. The novels of Chinua Achebe illustrate the chaos and the conflicting situation caused by the arrival of the Europeans who brought with them a new religion a new way of life and new ways of thinking which results in quest for identity.

Key Words:

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African Literature

African Literature forms a major part of twentieth century world literature. Critics have defined the term 'African Literature' variously. African Literature in the final analysis represents the writings of African nationals living on Africa soil reflecting the African native sensibility and atmosphere. Chinua Achebe has been called the father of modern African writing and many books and essays have been written about his work over the past fifty years. Achebe was the recipient of over 30 honorary degrees from Universities in England Scotland, Canada, South Africa, Nigeria and the United States. Achebe's writing about African Society, in telling from an African point of view the story of the colonization of the Igbo, tends to extinguish the misconception that African culture had been savage and primitive. In "Things fall apart", western culture is portrayed as being "arrogant and ethnocentric" insisting on quest for identity, loss of their culture and tradition, lack of proper leadership. As it had no kings or chiefs, Umuofian culture was vulnerable to invasion by western civilization. It is felt that the repression of the Igbo language at the end of the novel contributes greatly to the destruction of Identity and culture. Achebe portrays the culture as having a religion, a government, a system of money, and an artistic tradition, as well as a judicial system.

A Brief History of Nigeria

The History of Nigeria is bound up with its Geography. About one-third larger than the state of Texas, more than two hundred ethnic groups with their languages, beliefs, myths, symbols and cultures. The largest ethnic groups are Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani. This diversity of people is from invaders and climatic changes came to settle with the indigenous population. The events in "Things Fall Apart" take place at the end of the nineteenth century and in the early part of the twentieth century. In 1807, however, the British outlawed slave trade with in their empire. At the time, they did not yet control Nigeria and internal wars continually increased the available supply of captured slaves. Ultimately the British were prompted to occupy Nigeria for more than the slave trade. The British moved into Nigeria with a combination of government control, religious mission and economic incentive. In the north, the British ruled indirectly with the support of the local Muslim leaders, who collected taxes and administered a government on behalf of the British. In the south, the British had to intervene directly and forcefully to control the local population. The British operated an efficient administrative system and introduced a form of British culture to Nigeria. The British agreed to the Nigerian's demands and in 1960, Nigeria became an independent country.

Culture and Anarchy

"Things Fall Apart" novel portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. Achebe's novels shatter the stereotypical European portraits of native Africans. He is careful to portray the complex, advanced social institutions and artistic traditions of Igbo culture prior to its contact with Europeans. People commonly use "Things Fall Apart" as a story about the disintegration of an African culture as a result of European intervention. Although the people in Okonkwo's society had a common culture, they did not always agree on its various aspects. The analysis of culture Igbo involves myths, symbols, religion, totem, superstitions, rituals, festivals and icons. In Achebe's novels, the mask, the earth, the legends and the rituals all have significance in the story as well as in the history of the Igbo culture. There is the use of the mask to draw the spirits of the gods into the body of a person. A great crime in Igbo culture is to unmask. In the cultural history of Nigeria complex rituals also played a large part of the daily life of the people. Achebe's novels reflect this strict attention to rituals and taboos. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors. The space between an individual identity and his ancestors is narrow.

The Sources of the Titles for Achebe's Novels

The title for Achebe's novel comes from the poem, "The Second Coming" by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats. Both Yeats' poem and Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" speak of the breakdown of the "Old" order and its displacement by a "New" order. Which are mixed feelings of revulsion and fascination. Achebe has taken pains to point out through his novel that the Igbo culture is quite flexible and presumably would have resolved its contradictions in its own way without the intervention of the Europeans.

Quest for Identity in Achebe's Novels

Achebe was lucky enough to have the necessary background that enabled him to create his great novels. He knew of the departing glory of Africa, he witnessed the heady pre-independence era, the post-independent period and the stages of disillusionment which many African countries had experienced. In "Things Fall Apart" Achebe tells the story of an Igbo Warrior Okonkwo who quest for Identity and he single handedly fought the meddling of white rule in the native life. Wrestling is an apt identity for Okonkwo right from the beginning. Okonkwo is quite wealthy. He supports three wives and eight children. Okonkwo killed Ikemefuna, a boy from the Mbaino tribe to preserve the greatness of his tribe. The novels of Achebe generally end with tragedy which is the fate of the characters.

Achebe's novels approach a variety of themes. The tragic stories of his novels sets about textualising Igbo culture Identity. "No Longer At Ease" underlines the moral degradation and degeneration suffered by the western educated young men of modern Nigeria. They were miserably in a half-way house in Quest for identity for their native roots and torn by the western influence. Their situation is tragic because they are not loyal to their country. Achebe's novel "Arrow of God" was the story of Ezeulu, the high priest of Ulu, a village god created to save the people from destruction. It depicts with the narration of the charges that

overtaken the native religion which could be loss of identity of their own religion with the influence of other religions.

Achebe's novel "A man of the people", depicts the corruption in Nigerian politics and the growing distance between people and the government which may cause lack of proper identity of individuals in the country. Achebe's novels discuss the necessity of national integration religious harmony, democracy and protection of their culture and traditions.

Symbolism in Achebe's Novels

Symbolism is the applied use of symbols, iconic representations that carry particular conventional meanings. Symbolism was the term adopted by Jean Moreas. The evolution of representational capacities and symbolic expression has contributed essentially to human thought language and culture. In literature, authors often use different symbols to represent a particular concept. Throughout various forms of literature, various symbols are used to create meaning in a story. Achebe depicts the locusts that descend upon the village in highly allegorical terms that prefigure the arrival of the white settlers, who will feast on and exploit the resources of the Igbo. The locusts indicate the symbolic status of the white people who settled in Africa, Locusts break the tree branches, which symbolizes the fracturing of Igbo traditions and culture because of colonialism and white settlement. Achebe used symbolism of fire throughout his novel "Things Fall Apart". It is the intense and dangerous anger of Okonkwo. It is the only emotion that he allows himself to display. Fire can destroy everything. Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna and anger rules his actions until it destroys him.

Achebe's description of animal stories has logical explanations of natural phenomena. He used the tortoise, python and other animals to support his opinions and beliefs in Igbo culture. The killing of animals represents a symbolism of new form of spirituality and a new religious order. A variety of drums known as Ekwe, Udu and Ogene are pressed into service by the Igbo. The drummers are completely engrossed in the beating of the drums. During the wrestling match the drums located in the village ground echoes the excitement of the onlookers. They symbolize the entertainment proclamations such as birth, marriage, death, wrestling matches, title taking ceremonies and feasts and so on. The drum is a part and parcel of the life of a man in Nigeria.

Myths in the Achebe's Novels

The forcible break-up of an old order is the main theme of Achebe's novels in order to follow a new order. He was familiar with colonial and local history as a student of history in College and University. The stories of his novels represent the disintegration of an African culture as a result of European intervention. Achebe's perceptive analysis is the transformation of culture in its mechanism of adaptation to change. In his novels the customs, rituals and the culture of the primitive tribes give us an idea of the past African history and its myth. There is an evolution of African History in his novels "Things Fall Apart" and "Arrow of God". The myth is the dream of people and it is timeless. The Igbo communities of African mind have their own myths and they represent their fine honoured customs. In a society where ritual has largely become irrelevant, literature may perform the role of ritual as the history of drama in classical Greek and medieval Europe demonstrates. The writer's role in Africa is to protect the collective identity of their

history and myths. In "Arrow of God" Achebe described the process of protection of "Priesthood" of their ancestors by the clan against external threats. The myth of renewal of their spiritual power and strength which is commitment to their gods. They strengthen the clan's solidarity and assurance. Achebe also presents the evolutionary process involved in various myths and notions of the cult of the colonial situations. Therefore, the African myths or sacred tales received from antiquity are supernatural stories expressive of truths of archetypal human passions and explain the problems and mysteries of Life and Death.

History affects people's beliefs and re-orientates the direction of myth. Achebe defines myth in terms of its relevance and meaning of life within the historical context. Religion is the richest part of the African heritage embracing all areas of human life and activity. In the novels of Achebe we find history encountering myth; but there is no total replacement of myth by any vision or form by history. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian writer is truly outstanding among the few writers who excelled in portraying the African situation of the pre-colonial colonial and post-colonial era. He possesses an effortlessness of storytelling and employs a curiously moulded tone which is at once formal and fiercely passionate. So his novels contain a potent medicine which takes the reader into those occult zones of extra-ordinary beauty and the causes that spoiled it in the saga of African historical becoming. Achebe is lucky enough to have the necessary background that enabled him to create his great novels. His novels are multi-dimensional in its perspective various structures are skillfully woven into the structure of the novel to explore myths and symbols in African culture.

"Things Fall Apart" is the seminal African novel in English. Its most striking feature is to create a complex and sympathetic portrait of a traditional village culture in Africa. Achebe is trying not only to inform the outside world about Igbo cultural traditions. Many Africans in his time were ready to accept the European Judgment that Africa had no history or culture worth that Africa had no history or culture worth considering. Achebe was one of the founders of a Nigerian literary movement that drew upon the traditional oral culture of its indigenous people. The language in Achebe's novels is simple but dignified this choice of language was a brilliant and innovative stroke. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa. "Things Fall Apart" is set in the 1980s and portrays the clash between Nigeria's white colonial government and the traditional culture of the indigenous Igbo people. Achebe's novel shatters the stereotypical European portraits of active Africans. Achebe's education in English and his exposure to European customs have allowed him to capture both the European and the African perspectives on colonial expansion, religion, race, and culture. Achebe wanted this novel to respond to earlier colonial accounts of Africa; his choice of language was thus political. Achebe wanted to achieve cultural revitalization within and through English. "Things Fall Apart" appears to be a simple novel, but it is typical in some aspects. There are ways to illuminate the complexity of this novel, starting with the premise that African literature is a continuous tradition, or a complex of traditions. Modern African literature springs from and contributes to this age long tradition in its thematic and structural patterns, "Things Fall Apart" manifests its debt to the tradition of oral storytelling.

Disintegration of an African Culture

"Things Fall Apart" as a story about the disintegration of an African culture as a result of European intervention. This view fails to recognize the contradictions and dynamics in Okonkwo's society. Although the people in Okonkwo's society had a common culture, they did not always agree on its various aspects. We see, for example, an elder advising Okonkwo not to take part in the killing of Ikemefuna. This is quite strange, considering that the elders are the keepers of the culture and wisdom of the society and bearing in mind that the killing of Ikemefuna had been ordered by the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Several times in "Things Fall Apart" we are told about how social customs and values had been falling apart as a result of developments within the society itself. There are many people who think that pre-colonial African societies were static with everybody following the tradition without any opposition. That is a false view. As we see in "Things Fall Apart", those societies had internal tensions and dynamism such, which made them, change and develop.

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