

## **COLONIAL ABSURDISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART**

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### **Abstract**

*Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe is a novel focusing the African man, culture, religion, and their encounter with the white man. The novel reveals the insignificance of African people and culture. After a methodical reading of the novel one can realize that it strongly expresses how colonialism could make the lives of the Igbo people go absurd. Albert Camus, the absurdist denotes that absurdism is all about, meaninglessness of life. One can also find the similar relevance of insignificance and meaninglessness in Things Fall Apart. It is colonialism which makes the things and lives fall apart and absurd. The term colonial absurdism here signifies how colonization transforms the African life and creates absurdity or it may also mean absurdity of lives during colonization. The paper also tries to explore the relationship of two theories, absurdism and colonialism through the novel Things Fall Apart.*

*The paper researches aspects like Okonkwo, the protagonist and irrelevance of his life, his guilt and worthless manhood, bizarre religions, futile ambition, and absurd life and death. Okonkwo, the greatest wrestler, warrior and an unusual man, falls prey to the white man's coming. His moral strength and courage shudder when his own people desolate him and support the missionary. His life goes off balance and absurd at the end, rolling towards death and tragedy. Though Okonkwo is the greatest character ever created in the African literature, it is unfortunate and sad that Achebe makes him quit life in the climax. Through this novel, Achebe actually hints at the vague absurdity and helplessness of life during colonization. The other characters like Unoka, Ekwefi, Nwoye, Ikemefuna, Ezinma, Obierika and Mr. Brown too have their own absurd roles to play in the novel. The people of Umuofia turn to be existential characters at the end of the novel and so the novel ends with tragedy. Things fall apart in Umuofia as the centre becomes absurd and so cannot hold.*

**Key words: Colonialism, Absurdism, Absurdity and Okonkwo, Absurdity and religion.**

## **COLONIAL ABSURDISM IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART**

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Colonialism is a theory denoting domination of the Europeans or the Western over the Eastern. It is a theory widely discussed and studied till date by the postcolonial critics worldwide. The terms connected with colonialism are slavery, alienation, humiliation, exile at home, loss of identity, being othered, cultural, religious and political crises, hyphenised positions, trauma, disorder, psychological issues, debates etc. Colonialism brought in several drastic and disastrous shifts in the lives of the people who were colonized. Today colonialism seems and appears to be eradicated after the wars of the independence. But the colonial mindset still remains and haunts the ways and routines of the lives of the colonized. They are still the victims of the aftermath effects of colonialism. But the emergence of Postcolonial literature and theory has helped them to break the grips of the colonial hangover. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, NgugiwaThiong'o, Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, BuchiEmechita, Sara Suleri, GayatriSpivaketc, have voiced out against colonialism in their own approach.

Chinua Achebe is considered as the founding father of African literature. His novel *Things Fall Apart* is an epitome of African mankind and colonization. It is an archetype of the above mentioned terms revealing colonialism. Chinua Achebe expresses that though times have changed today the Postcolonial writers have not secured a deserving position and are not received and appreciated in the world literature. In his essay *Colonialist criticism*, Achebe opines that,

"WHEN MY FIRST novel was published in 1958 a very unusual review of it was written by a British woman, Honor Tracy, who is perhaps not so much a critic as a literary journalist. But what she said was so intriguing that I have never forgotten it. If I remember rightly she headlined it *Three cheers for mere Anarchy!*' The burden of the review itself was as follows: These bright Negro barristers...who talk so glibly about African culture, how would they like to return to wearing raffia skirts? How would novelist Achebe like to go back to the mindless times of his grandfather instead of holding the modern job he has in broadcasting in Lagos? I should perhaps point out that colonialist criticism is not always as crude as this but the exaggerated grossness of a particular example may sometimes prove useful in studying the anatomy of the species. There are three principal parts here: Africa's inglorious past (raffia skirts) to which Europe brings the blessing of civilization (Achebe's modern job in Lagos) and for which Africa returns ingratitude (sceptical novels like *Things Fall Apart*)."

### **Absurdity and Things Fall Apart**

*Things fall apart* is a milestone in Postcolonial literature. The novel describes the first phase of colonization and its effects. The title indicates and signifies that things fall apart with the White

man's arrival. Turmoil, chaos and absurdity are created in the lives of Igbo people of Umuofia as the White man steps in. The title taken from the line 'Things Fall Apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world', in Yeats' *The Second Coming* symbolizes colonial absurdism and disorder in the novel *Things Fall Apart*. Hence absurdism and the falling apart of things are connected in the novel because of colonization. Anarchy and meaninglessness prevail upon the world as centre is absurd and cannot hold the lives.

In philosophy, the absurd refers to the conflict between (a) the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and (b) the human inability to find any. In this context absurd does not mean 'logically impossible', but rather 'humanly impossible'. The universe and the human mind do not each separately cause the absurd, but rather, the absurd arises by the contradictory nature of the two, existing simultaneously. Absurdism therefore, is a philosophical school of thought stating that the efforts of humanity to find inherent meaning will ultimately fail (and hence are absurd) because the sheer amount of information as well as the vast realm of the unknown make certainly impossible. And yet, some absurdists state that one should embrace the absurd condition of humankind while conversely continuing to explore and search for meaning. As a philosophy, absurdism thus explores the fundamental nature of the absurd and how individuals, once becoming conscious of the absurd, should respond to it. Absurdism is a belief that humans exist in a world with no purpose or order. The philosophy that encompasses the absurd is referred to as absurdism. While absurdism may be considered a branch of existentialism, it is a specific idea that is not necessary to an existentialist view. Acceptance of absurd is the solution in which one accepts and continues to live in spite of it. Camus endorsed this solution, believing that by accepting the absurd, one can achieve absolute freedom and that by recognizing no religious or other moral constraints and by revolting against the absurd, while simultaneously accepting it as unstoppable, one could possibly be content from the personal meaning, constructed in the process. In Camus' view there are three possible philosophical responses to this predicament. Two of these he condemns as evasions; the other he puts forward as a proper solution. Our first choice is blunt and simple: physical suicide. If we decide that a life without some essential purpose or meaning is not worth living, we can simply choose to kill ourselves. Camus rejects this choice as cowardly. In his terms it is a repudiation or renunciation of life, not a true revolt. Choice two is the religious solution of positing a transcendent world of solace and meaning beyond the Absurd. Camus calls this solution 'philosophical suicide' and rejects it as transparently evasive and fraudulent. To adopt a supernatural solution to the problem of the absurd (for example, through some type of mysticism or leap of faith) is to annihilate reason, which in Camus' view is as fatal and self-destructive as physical suicide. In effect, instead of removing himself from the absurd confrontation of self and world like the physical suicide, the religious believer simply removes the offending world, replacing it, via a kind of metaphysical abracadabra, with a more agreeable alternative. Choice three (in Camus' view the only authentic and valid solution) is simply to accept absurdity, or better yet to embrace it, and to continue living. Since, the absurd in his view is an unavoidable, indeed defining characteristic of the human condition, the only proper response to it is full, unflinching, courageous acceptance.

The protagonist Okonkwo in *Things fall apart* chooses the first choice endorsed by Camus i.e. choosing to kill ourselves. It might appear cowardly as explained, but he chooses it as

he was betrayed by his own clan and he could not live under the shackles of the white man. Though he believes in second choice i.e. religious solutions, they fail to work and ostracize the white man from his clan. The obvious reason for his death is the coming of the white man and the more obvious reason is the betrayal. Things in his life fall apart and absurdity prevails because of these reasons. Soon he realizes the meaninglessness of life and commits suicide.

### **Absurdity and Okonkwo**

This experience of meaninglessness and the creation of meaning are closely related to the experience of angst or existential anxiety. This occurs against the backdrop of the personal realization that I am ultimately alone in the world and that I have to contend with my mortality and other limitations, taking responsibility for myself in the face of endless challenges and confusions. The experience of meaninglessness becomes a major problem in many people's lives and it may lead to a number of concrete difficulties, which may look like personality problems or other forms of pathology. It is by no means easy to be truly available to help others in finding meaning in their lives when their existence is in crisis. The meaning of life is never given and cannot be transmitted unless a person is willing to search for it independently. It could therefore be argued that the meaning of human living is to learn to give it meaning. In order to come to a position from which we can learn to give meaning we have to first come to a point of doubt and a realization of the lack of intrinsic meaning in our lives. Frankl (1946) spoke of three sources of meaning. Firstly, through taking from the world what is there, learning to savor and appreciate what is already given to us, as in aesthetic enjoyment of nature or the pleasures of the senses. Secondly, to give the world new enjoyments through acts of our own creativity, giving it to others as well. Thirdly, by our attitudinal values, which could include suffering, when it is necessary to endure the harsh conditions we may be exposed to. If there is no alternative to our suffering, it is always possible to find an attitude of human dignity by enduring the hard labor, pain and disappointments. This is what Okonkwo does as he too has no alternative.

The novel opens with perhaps the most celebrated, certainly the most famous opening paragraph in the history of African literature. It begins with Okonkwo's introduction. Okonkwo the warrior is known to the nine villages and beyond. His achievement is that he has defeated Amalinze, who for seven years was unbeaten. Okonkwo was a synonym for vigorous wild spirit. He had a very powerful 'chi' [inner strength] within. Though he was young, he had owned two titles, was a wealthy farmer and had three wives. Okonkwo was ferocious and created trembles of fear in the minds of people. His wives and children were obviously afraid of him. Okonkwo did not have a happy childhood and in his early age itself had realized the need and worth of survival and independent living. Though luck was not in his favor, he firmly believed in rigorous hard work and commitment. As a little boy he resented his effeminate and lethargic father Unoka and did not inherit anything from him. He completely believed his self. He compared himself to a lizard that jumped from the high Iroko tree to the ground and said, he would praise himself if no one else did.

Okonkwo was masculine. He cultivated yam because yam was considered a man's crop. People were struck by his brusqueness. He knew how to kill a man's spirit, especially of those who did not possess titles which signified manliness. He considered them as feminine. It was true that

Okonkwo was manly. Women in the village were fascinated by him and Ekwefi, the village beauty has discarded her husband to become the wife of Okonkwo.

It is quite mystifying and incongruous that, the same Okonkwo in the end commits suicide. One can hardly visualize that a warrior like Okonkwo would ever quit life. His father's words that 'it is difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone' prove to be true for him. As every man's life is absurd having its own fate of absurdity and disorder, Okonkwo's life encounters absurd things happening, on which he has no control. Life plays hard for even a man like Okonkwo and he loses the war of life. His life turns to be meaningless and so Okonkwo chooses suicide, the final escape.

It all begins with his ill-fated father, Unoka who was known for debts and idleness. He always wore a haggard and mournful look. He represented failure and poverty. When he died, he only left Okonkwo with heavy debts. Okonkwo was definitely ashamed of his father. His father's life was a life lesson to him. But he had a fear. Okonkwo's whole life was dominated by a fear, the fear of failure and weakness. It was the fear of him; lest he should be found resembling his father. Even as a grown up man, he remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was 'agbala'. That was how Okonkwo realized for the first time that agbala was another name for a woman and it could also mean a man who had no title. This was how Okonkwo developed hatred towards everything his father Unoka loved. He was possessed by the fear of his father's contemptible death which haunted him and so he had thrown himself to life.

### **Absurdity and Death**

Heidegger emphasized the importance of death as a marker of our finite nature. Death in this sense is not to be taken as something happening to us at some point later, but as something that is irrelevant to us right now. The realities of our mortality and of our incompleteness have to be faced for us to become aware of and true to our nature, which is to be finite. Heidegger considered that the reality of our death is that it completes us. The recognition of the inevitability of death gives us a certainty that nothing else can give us. The fear in the face of death allows us to claim back our individuality, our authentic being, as we are inevitably alone in death and find ourselves much sobered and humbled by the knowledge of our mortality. Death, according to

Heidegger: death is part of me and to accept my living towards this end gives my life back to me in a new way. We are thus doomed to feel a sense of incompleteness as life requires us to try ever harder to be equal to what we are capable of, even though we can never achieve it. Most of us will therefore have a frequent sensation of unease with ourselves. The awareness that we are not true to our full human ability and that we live unauthentic will lead to the experience of existential guilt. In existential guilt we hear the voice of our conscience and this must be taken extremely serious. We are not guilty because we have fallen short by other people's standards or because we have behaved badly, but simply because we fall short as human beings.



But it is unbelievable and disgusting that though Okonkwo had thrown himself to life, he dies a death of shame, more shameful than his father's and falls short as a human. He commits suicide by hanging himself. According to the rituals in his religion, strangers had to perform the funeral rites to those who kill themselves. It was regrettable that his own people could not perform the funeral rites or the last tributes to Okonkwo. Okonkwo might have never thought of committing suicide, however he turns to be an existential and absurd character at the end as all he believes proves to be fake and all the people he trusts betray. Okonkwo and all that he earned and achieved prove to be meaningless one by one signifying absurdity and disorder.

### **Absurdity and Manhood**

Okonkwo's insignificant manhood as a father, husband and a leader too declares the absurdity as he becomes womanish at certain points in the novel. His roaring manhood succumbs to failure and he becomes effeminate. He was outrageous and always put out his frustration and anger on his wives and children. His meaningless and worthless manhood is proved though he does not exhibit it. For instance, his behavior with the youngest wife Ojiugo states that he had failed to control himself and hides his incapacity by dominating and thrashing her. Okonkwo beats her during the week of peace when peace had to be compulsorily maintained. The reason seems to be very simple. Ojiugo had gone to plait her hair and was late to return. Okonkwo could not bear this and so beats her. Though he was punished for this act by the Earth Goddess, he never regrets and repents. In case of his second wife Ekwefi too he follows the same. He beats her for cutting the banana leaf and shoots at her to let out his absurd anger. Though she was rescued, this behavior of Okonkwo reveals that he used his wives for an outlet and to hide his worthless manhood. He ruled his wives and children by frightening them and not by love, which indeed was an unmanly act. He had fear suppressed within that he must not resemble his effeminate father and tried to showcase him furious and masculine. In case of Ikemefuna it is clearly proved and Okonkwo realizes it. Ikemefuna was an unlucky boy who was under the care of Okonkwo. Ikemefuna considered Okonkwo as his father. Unfortunately the Oracle had pronounced that Ikemefuna should be killed. Okonkwo could not bear to see Ikemefuna killed.

'As the man who had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet, Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, 'My father, they have killed me!' as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his matchet and cut him down. He was afraid of being weak.' [44]

Though Okonkwo cuts Ikemefuna with his matchet, his inner self haunts and hovers with pain and guilt. After the death of Ikemefuna, Okonkwo could not eat for two days and felt very weak and nervous. He shivered like a woman full of grief and guilt. He wonders and ponders over his celebrated manhood and is ashamed. His insignificant and absurd manhood is also proved when he doesn't rebel or protest against the white district commissioner, when he was jailed for three days. The last instance of his absurd manhood is that when he quits life. It is shocking to see that Okonkwo, the great warrior and wrestler giving up and committing suicide. It is truly bizarre that Okonkwo loses his path of ambition. One can clearly visualize a drastic shift in Okonkwo's personality. He as a young boy was found ruthlessly ambitious and was made for great things. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams. He had two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter tribal wars which symbolized his manhood.

'Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders.'[7]

Okonkwo's worthless manhood is also proved because of Nwoye. Nwoye, the son of Okonkwo resurrects Unoka and his effeminateness. Okonkwo is worried severely about his son and his impotence. Nwoye does not resemble Okonkwo in any regard and was unlike his father. To quote,

'At Nwoye's age Okonkwo had already become famous throughout Umuofia for his wrestling and his fearlessness. Okonkwo sighed heavily, and as if in sympathy the smouldering log also sighed. And immediately Okonkwo's eyes were opened and he saw the whole matter clearly. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash'. [113]

Okonkwo's urge for ambition and manhood subside and descend at the end of the novel. In the end he fails utterly and gives up his life.

### **Absurdity and Colonialism**

It is in the fifteenth chapter of the novel that the white man is introduced. The white man's coming was an evil omen for the people of Umuofia. It had caused a considerable stir in the villages. Okonkwo was in exile for seven long years and by the time he returned, there was profound change in Umuofia and it was hardly recognizable. Okonkwo was deeply grieved. He mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so strangely become soft like women. It is bewildering to know that Okonkwo, when jailed by the white district commissioner deceptively, does not create any havoc and rebel or protest against the officers. He sits quite with other leaders of Umuofia for three long days in the jail. Although he expresses his wrath by saying that he would murder a white man, he is suppressed by others around him as they feared that they would be hanged. However at the end of the novel, when he kills a white man, he realizes that it was futile and that it was only he who wanted to war with the white as he does not receive any support. Instead he overhears his own clan people murmuring and expressing disgust for killing the white man. He was traumatized by this betrayal by his own clan and people. Okonkwo could not tolerate this pain of infidelity and ends his painful and shameful life by killing himself.

### **Absurdity and Religion**

Throughout the novel, there are examples of absurdity in religion and religious practices. Though the concepts of religion are strong and active in the beginning they diminish and descend in the second half. They are destroyed completely when they come in collision with colonization. The absurdity of religious practices is proved and the religions lose their existence and value. Absurdity of religion in Things fall apart takes place mainly due to colonization. There are two religions here clashing and superseding each other. Though in the beginning white people and their religion are not accepted, later there are examples of being accepted and practiced.

The first instance, where one can analyze the absurdity is in Ikemefuna's case. Ikemefuna is murdered for no reason. Though it was declared by the Oracle that Ikemefuna was an ill omen for Umuofia, it sounds quite absurd that, he should be killed for that reason.

Second incident is that Okonkwo beats his wife during the week of peace, breaking the rules. Though he was punished with one she goat, one hen, a piece of cloth and a hundred cowries, it seems absurd and arrogant that Okonkwo was a person who would never accept his errors. Though he is repentant he does not apologize with his wife. His religion too does not practice it and it is pure absurdity of the religion that he had to just sacrifice some things instead of apologizing.

Third illustration is that Okonkwo was sent to exile for killing a boy accidentally during a funeral celebration. He had to run away from his fatherland Umuofia and spend his exile at his motherland. Everything he had achieved and gained all these years went futile for this absurd reason. To quote,

'Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. The only course open to Okonkwo was to flee from the clan. It was a crime against the earth goddess to kill a clansman, and a man who committed it must flee from the land. The crime was of two kinds, male and female. Okonkwo had committed the female, because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after seven years.'[91]

The fourth occurrence is of Nwoye. Nwoye is Okonkwo's son and victim of colonization who falls prey to the white man's religion. He joins the white man's company discarding his own father, religion and clan. It is quite obvious that Nwoye hates his father as he knew he lost Ikemefuna because of Okonkwo. The religious practices of his clan appeared to be meaningless and bizarre as Ikemefuna was killed for no valid reason. He seems to hate his own religious practices as he had lost his intimate friend Ikemefuna due to the absurd practices of his religion. He was somehow smoothened to hear Mr.Brown, the white man and his preaching on religion.

'It was not the mad logic of Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. The hymn about brothers who sat in darkness and in fear seemed to answer a vague and persistent question that haunted his young soul- the question of the twins crying in the bush and the question of Ikemefuna who was killed'.[108]

In the span of two years, the white man's religion was considered and many people in Umuofia and other places had converted themselves, especially the outcast and ostracized ones. In white man's religion, there was a soothing corner for even the outcastes. The missionaries had come to Umuofia too and built a church there. But many people thought that the white man's religion would not last forever. The converts were called as the excrement of the clan and the faith as a mad dog that had come to eat it up.

The next example is of the evil forest. This example clearly denotes the absurdity of religion due to colonization. Every clan and village had its evil forest. In it were buried all those who died of the evil diseases. It was the dumping ground for the potent fetishes of great



medicine men when they died. It was a place alive with sinister forces and darkness. It was this place which was given to the white to build the church. The people of Mbanta wanted the white religion to perish as the whites boasted about victory over death. The people of Mbanta expected that the missionaries would die within four days. But to their bewilderment nobody died. They were all puzzled and thought that the white man's god was powerful and there were three more converts added as this happens. They waited for twenty eight days for the whites to perish. But to their surprise the whites remained alive. This incident attracted many converts and they joined the white man's religion.

### **Conclusion**

Well, the idea that human living takes place in the tension between opposing forces is present throughout existential philosophy. Most obviously this is represented by Heidegger's (1927) description of the tension between life and death, or by Sartre's descriptions of the tension between being and nothingness, expressed in the tension between being-for-itself (the being of consciousness) and being-in-itself (the being of objects) (Sartre 1943). Kierkegaard for his part described this tension as one between the infinite and the finite. He claimed that one can get too much drawn into either the finite or the infinite and that the challenge of living is to maintain the right sort of tension between both. The person who is immersed in the finite gets caught up in the dangers of concrete living. The person who gets too immersed in the infinite is the dreamer, who merges with the universe and becomes either overwhelmed or terrified or depressed by it ending up feeling alienated from everyday reality. In essence philosophers have recognized that human experience is multiple and complex and takes place on a number of different levels. Firstly there is our involvement in a physical world of objects, where we struggle between survival and death. Secondly there is our activity in a social world of other people, where we struggle with the contradictions between our need to belong and the possibility of our isolation. Thirdly there is a personal dimension where we grapple with the tension between integrity and disintegration. Finally there is a spiritual dimension where we seek to find meaning against the threat of meaninglessness. On each of these dimensions we have to learn to stand in the tension between opposites, discovering that we cannot have life without death, love without hate, identity without confusion, and wisdom without doubt.

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