

Myth and History in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

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Abstract:

All African writers, though in their distinctive ways, have been concerned in their writings with African experience, African modes of consciousness, with traditional or historically transformed images, rituals and social structures of their own common, but diversified culture. The literature of West Africa offers the most passionate expression of the colonial confrontation with an intensity unique in aesthetic formulation of form and feeling, demanding commitment from the writer Chinua Achebe. In this context he states: "We must first set the scene which is authentically African; then what follows will be meaningful and deep". This means recreating the past not only for enlightenment but even more for our own education because "the past with its imperfection, never lacked dignity".

Transformation from the old to a New Order:

Achebe looks objectively at the African history and myth in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, tracing the transformation of Africa from the old to a new order. In his perceptive analysis he places the transformation as a resultant of culture in its mechanism of adaptation to change. In both the novels the customs, rituals and the culture of the primitive tribals give us an idea of the past African history and its myth. In these novels the historical forces are emerging and there is a view of new order from the old. There is an evolution of African history in both the novels. Linear history belongs to the mode of the West, while the myth is the dream of a people, and it is timeless. The Igbo communities of African mind have their own myths and they represent their time honoured customs.

Literature Performing the Role of Ritual:

In a society where ritual has largely become irrelevant, literature may perform the role of ritual, as the history of drama in classical Greece and medieval Europe demonstrates. Literature would thus represent the attempt to perceive a pattern and meaning in an apparently meaningless or illogical sequences of events. The significance of Achebe's writings for himself and his society is shown by his own statements. In "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation" he says that a writer's role in Africa is to show his country men that their people had undeniably a dignity even before the Europeans came. Eva Figs says: Ritual drama even at the most elementary level, involves the idea of history, and history represents one form of collective identity.

Enacting History through Ritual:

Achebe wishes to assume a role whose need has been felt in primitive societies; the need to preserve a collective identity by enacting history through ritual. Infact a similar process is described in *Arrow of God* when Ezeulu enacts the “priesting” of his ancestor by the clan in order to claim Ulu’s protection against external threats. This ritualistic re- enactment of a historical incident is not merely a reminder, but it is a renewal of Ezeulu’s power and the clan’s commitment to Ulu. As a result, this event serves to strengthen the clan’s solidarity and assurance.

Achebe also brings out poignantly the effects of the colonial situation on the lives of individuals, especially if they are outstanding members of their community. He demonstrates the destruction on different levels and in varying scales which colonialism involves. But the same is true of any situation where the old order changes, to give place to the new.

The Falling apart:

Achebe’s depth of vision is that he is able to place the history and myth of the clan in a larger perspective. As Roderick Wilson points out:

Achebe sees traditional African society as being broken up by the forces of a civilization that is itself disintegrating.... As far as *Things Fall Apart* is concerned, that force, British - Christian Imperialism, the external element responsible for the breaking down of Umuofian society is itself a part of something which is breaking down. There is thus a falling apart within a falling apart.

W.B Yeats saw history as a succession of civilizations, one superseded by another when it failed to meet a new, unfamiliar breed of challenges and demand. The perspective and the fields of vision stand poles apart. While for Yeats the pattern is an instrument of prophecy, Achebe is not interested in prophecy, rather in analysing the present.

Powerless God:

Achebe’s work becomes cleaner in the light of the two novels dealing with the present day situation – *No longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*. The corruption which is rife in modern Nigeria seems to reflect emptiness in the values which have replaced the traditional ones. But there is no over reference to this aspect in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*.

In the two novels, the secondary rhythm is seen to be the evolution of the cult of the son, which Achebe considers the paradigm, the colonial situation. The archetypal patterns underlying the two stories are thus the sacrifice and the scapegoat. But a further development is that the God to whom the sacrifice should be made has himself become powerless and the people turn to other powers for sustenance.

The Break Down of the Old Structure:

The theme of contact and change is significant in *Arrow of God* as well as in *Things Fall Apart*. This is highly relevant for the human involvement and especially of Ezeulu who attempts to adapt himself to the present constantly. Ezeulu, the chief priest, and a man marked out by his role as a preserver of collective solidarity, is keenly aware of the break down of the old structure and attributes the change to “the new age”. Ezeulu often said that the dead fathers of Umuaro looking at the world from Ani-Mmo must be utterly bewildered by the ways of the new change.

The difference between divine and human values becomes more acute and apparent in *Arrow of God* than in *Things Fall Apart*. Every minor event in the novel testifies to the theme that is explored, and our attention is immediately focused on Ezeulu who embodies this dilemma in its most acute form. In complexity too, Ezeulu far out does the hero of *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo’s pride and confident personality springs from his loyalty to the tribe and values upheld by it, whereas Ezeulu is proud and arrogant in his own right.

The Value of Change:

Achebe comments that Nwaka uses the term “king” to talk about an individual who sets himself apart and against society. And he adds that “such behavior would run against the social cohesion and group integration to traditional Igbo communities”. He also says that “Ezeulu is a different kind of man from Okonkwo. He is an intellectual ... so he goes into the roots of things and he is ready to accept the change intellectually. He also sees the value of change. His readiness to come to terms with the change, in the form of white man, poses serious external threat to Umuaro, and Ezeulu is deeply aware of it.

The novelist sees the whole narrative in its total historical and cultural context. He argues that if Ulu had meant to teach his priest loyalty and tribal wisdom, he had chosen a dangerous time, for “a deity who chose a time such as to destroy his priest or abandon him to his enemies was inciting people to take liberties”. As in the case of *Things Fall Apart* the inadequacies of a disintegrating system provides space and accommodation for more flexible values, which acquires a stronger foothold in a time of crisis.

G.D. Killam writes: “At the end, Igbo society is smashed and the important part, perhaps the finest part, is lost. When Obika dies, the God has claimed his harvest and it is the Christian god that reaps it”. As Achebe puts it when they brought in the harvest, “they brought home the harvest in the name of the son, which has made critics decide that Christian religion had won in the end. But it was not a victory for Christianity. It was a victory for Umuaro. Charles R. Larson thus calls *Things Fall Apart* the “Archetypal African Novel”. The two novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* of Achebe deals with his country’s past will remain important. In these two novels we can see the finest exposition of the fundamental beliefs of the community and the “shape and set” of the Igbo culture. In the two heroes one finds superb specimens of Igbo manhood, and yet they are memorable as distinct and strongly individualised characters. The lives of individuals articulate with the life of the community.

The Tragic Flaw:

The individual heroes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* have their tragic flaw. And their tragedy is compared to the tragic heroes of Shakespeare. The heroes of tragedies are all great

men with admirable qualities and they achieve astonishing things but at the same time have a fault that is likely to overshadow their merits. The great Greek hero Oedipus marries his own mother unknowingly and that error results in his fall.

The Quest Myth:

The hero's intellectual greatness gradually finds its own place. Even as early as the time of Ulysses, physical adventure was combined with a thirst for knowledge. We admire Ulysses for his courage and valour. Tennyson in his short poem "Ulysses" effects the unification of the hero's quest for knowledge and thirst for adventure. Ulysses is never tired of adventure though old and near death. He still wants to see places, meet new men and get more knowledge. Therefore we find that it is difficult to draw a line that would separate more physical feat from intellectual accomplishment. With Ulysses we began to have the hero with 'quest –myth' – the hero who starts with a thirst to gain knowledge.

The Individual in Relation to the Society:

Okonkwo and Ezeulu, the protagonists of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* respect the classical and the Shakespearean type of hero. They had an ideal before them as in the case of the classical heroes. All the same, they had a tragic flaw as in Shakespearean heroes. It is worthwhile to study the background of the society in which they lived. The clan plays a prominent role in the life of the heroes. It has been said that the African novelists create for us the problem and effort of people creating a visible culture in response to the demands of their environment. The individualities of heroes can be studied only in relation with the society.

A Majestic Failure:

Abiola Irele declares that in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe succeeds "in striking a profoundly tragic note". Though Okonkwo fails in the end, it is a majestic failure. *Things Fall Apart* can be considered as an epic. The strength of epic is in the structure of events it presents in order to depict in imaginative form the history of a society. Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* is in an intermediate position and the setting in which he is placed offers him large opportunities and he is more like to Okonkwo than Obi.

History versus Myth:

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 history either in vision or form.

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