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Depiction of African Subaltern and Females in Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart': A Post-colonial Study

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Abstract:

As the title of the novella 'Things Fall Apart' indicates the protagonist of this Nigerian story Okonkwo, the wrestler and a fighter warrior of the Ibo clan, faces defacement and is defilement after the exile of seven years in Mbanta, his motherland, he arrives back to Umuofia, his fatherland. He faces the religious and racial tensions when in conflict with the new White and Christian faith and decides to battle against it. He kills a White messenger and commits suicide as the tale ends and the Commissioner mentions him in his book: *The Pacification of Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. In his conflict against the new community, he tries hard to defend his old faith but fails to gratify and restore his tribe and there in lies the significance of the title taken up from W. B. Yeats's poem 'The Second Coming'. African minorities and subalterns in the novella stand in stark contrast to the new White Christian faith which tries to colonise them and succeeds towards the end. The tragedy of the hero as he commits suicide highlights the coming of new age of colonialism in Nigeria which according to the writer Chinua Achebe is as superstitious as his old faith. The writer has intermingled both the cultures with the third person narrative and has given the plotting in three parts and twenty-five chapters. He has depicted the local tribal culture, subalterns, women and has garnished the colours and flavours by myths, tales within tales, traditions and way of life which makes the novella an unforgettable African classic. However, the catharsis and plotting neither favours the subaltern nor the females. In the manner colonial wings spreads on the tribe and the country the novella offers a significant point of view for post-colonial

reader and that is the purpose of its selection for the study. The novella remains the first part in the trilogy and the two other novels are '*No longer at Ease*' and '*Arrow of God*'

Keywords: Subaltern, Post-colonialism, Novella, Colonialism, Third person Narrative, Patriarchy, Feminism.

In a book entitled 'The Quintessence of Nehru' (ed. 1961), the first Indian Prime Minister Shri Jawaharlal Nehru had said, "If the world suffers from mental deterioration or from moral degradation, then something goes wrong at the very root of civilization or culture. Even though that civilization may drag out for a considerable period, it grows less and less vital and ultimately tumbles down." The quote sums up the situation depicted in the novella and is apt to almost all colonial encounters. Nigeria, a western African country, with its varied cultural and regional diversity had to face British colonialism in the beginning of twentieth century and become independent. It had its problems and issues then and now too. The novella depicts an Ibo socio-cultural diversity in Nigeria which is a small religious minority. The pre-colonial Muslim and during colonial times British Christianity and post-colonial civil wars in the countries prove the Nigerian social conflicts and highlights and tensions in the African continent.

In an essay by Chinua Achebe, entitled, "*The Novelist as Teacher*", the writer states,

"Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement"³

The novella put forth the denigration and self-abasement of the local Ibo culture at the hand of White Christians and interrogates the tragedy of the protagonist Okonkwo. The surrender of the African fictional village of Umuofia by the subaltern villagers highlights the truth of colonial power and negates the possibility for the noble aspirations of the local culture depicted. With the spiritual and religious downfall of the community at the hand of the colonial power comes the suicide of the hero. The writer authentically brings the succulent truth with the ignorant local and the omnipotent colonial. The dichotomy of insider and outsider is worked on with the third person narrative by the writer. He tells a story with a circular fashion and not by a conventional linear time patterns.

The tragedy of the protagonist, Okonkwo pacifies the primitive subaltern in the tribe, country and the continents. As they surrender to the white British Europeans, their colonialism seems to fall apart and that is why the title of the novella is significantly chosen and given. Subaltern in this case are the primitives in Ibo tribe. They are civilized through education by the white Christian European towards the end of the novella. The wiping out of the old faith, customs, believes and traditional culture by replacing it with supposedly better one is not only unacceptable to the hero but also to the reader. The falling apart is against the local culture and when the protagonist tries to oppose it, he is imprisoned and brutally bitten. The humiliation takes toll on him and left with no option, he commits suicide when the commissioner comes to inquire and arrest him for killing his messenger.

The division in three parts twenty-five chapters has two beautifully creative tales. First tale is about the 'mosquito and the ear' and the second is about 'the tortoise named all of you'. Okonkwo exile for seven years in his motherland Mbanta along with his three wives and children's is depicted in the second part. His development along with local primitive subaltern and patriarchal culture takes centre stage in the first part with its thirteen chapter. The protagonist's killing of Ikemefuna, the boy brought to Umuofia as an exchange along with a girl, his personal 'chi' God, and primitive religious practices, the peace week followed by the tribe, the marriage customs, the planting of yams, the fear of falling like his weak father Unoka in his mind and then by mistake killing of the boy which brings his exile highlight the first part. In short, the part focuses and celebrates the local Ibo tribe with its heroic hereditary subaltern culture.

The second part brings the hero of the novella to seven years of exile because of the crime committed against the public and the land. It talks about the killing of the first missionary and hanging of his iron-horse, bicycle. The news about the arriving and slow spread of the missionaries through evangelical and educational means, soon giving way to building of their rule and thus wiping through dominance, the very existence of Ibo tribal culture and the setting of colony, marks the beginning of colonialism in the second part with seven chapter developing the novella ahead. The slow spread of the other culture and the inability the local subaltern people to stop or recognize the true purpose of the missionary weaken and breaks the spirit of tribe, country and continent.

The third and last part with five chapters brings a catharsis. It evokes a pity and fear along with anger in the protagonist and the reader. It highlights the loosing of the village after village to

the colony and inability of the villagers to stop the inevitable. The attempts of the hero to protest and then his complete surrender to colonialism by his suicide paves the way for spreading of wings of empire on the new colony. Thus, the tragedy shows the winning of the commissioner of the empire and loosing of the local tribal hero. The title of the novella taken from W. B. Yeats poem entitled 'The Second Coming' sums the story in truthfulness.

Ratnesh Katulkar while talking about M. Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar views on women in his abstract cited in the reference says,

“Mahatma Phule saw women as equal or rather better than man. In his 'Sarvajanik Dharma Pustak' (Trans. 'Public Religion Book') he writes, “Both men and women are equally qualified to enjoy human rights in equal measure.... The patient woman carries their child without complaint. She does her duty and brings up the child. She teaches the little one to walk and to speak. Don't we have the proverb that one can repay all debts except the mother's debt? Undoubtedly, the woman is superior to man.” On a similar note, Dr Ambedkar declined to accept any progress if women in that community remained backward. He said, “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.””⁴

In the context of the novella the positions of the women depicted is of double marginalised or subjugated. They are subjugated by men in both the Ibo and White Colonial European Christians culture. They are in the periphery of their own patriarchy and in a new colonised world they are further petrified. Okonkwo has three wives namely: Nwoye's mother, Ekwefi and Ojiugo have their own huts and the hero will dictate terms for their lives. All the three wives along with other female folks in the novella not only fear but follow, respect and support the Ibo patriarchy as normal and they along with other women see nothing wrong in it. Dowry, bridal-prize, child-marriage, black magic belief and following personal 'chi' and oracle orders is rooted deeply at social, cultural and psychological levels in all of them.

In second part when Okonkwo goes to his motherland as he is in exile for seven years the importance of being mother and the matriarchal pattern gets highlighted. However, in Mbanta Uchendu, from maternal side made it comfortable for the wrestler Okonkwo to lack nothing in demand and need. Equality, freedom and humanity ideas seems too modern for both Ibo and Christians. It is ironic that even the white colonisers under the Queen Victoria's rule did not have any nun or woman to teach or civilise or to rule brought in the native village.

Okonkwo often thinks that his daughter Enzinma, should have been a boy or son. His son Nwoye has submitted to the white peoples rule and has submitted to their subjugation. When Okonkwo gets the news about his conversion and following of Christian method he is further demoralised. With Umofia's following the Christian and white methods his heart is completely broken and there remains no hope for the protagonist and he commits suicide. With this news of a great wrestlers and warrior ending his life the commissioner thinks he can write a paragraph if not a chapter or an essay or book on him. The title of the commissioner book is deeply suggestive of this aspect of colonised and colonisers mind set.

The depiction of African 'subaltern' or minorities and the females reflects not only their subjugation at the hand of colonial power but also makes the novella realistic about the times in which it is written. Read between the lines, on the national level of Nigeria, it shows crumbling of a nation due the ignorance of masses towards their self and nation. The nation that forgets to respect its own culture is doomed to be colonised. It makes the whole process of colonialism easy to comprehend for the foreign reader. The low self esteem accompanied by clashes between culture leaves the community on the threshold of colonialism.

The novella remains one of the seminal texts in post-colonial literature, providing a nuanced exploration of the cultural, social, psychological, economic and political disruptions caused by colonialism in Africa. Published in 1958, the novella is set in the Igbo society of Nigeria and examines the arrival of European missionaries and colonial administrators in the late 19th century. some of the major themes are clash of cultures, colonial disruptions, resistance and accommodation, language and power, identity and alienation and critics of colonialism.

Chinua Achebe portrays the customs, religion and governance of his community and challenges the western perspective that African Igbo community were primitive and chaotic before the arrival of the western power. It hints at the cultural erosion of the society symbolising the broader dismantling of the indigenous traditions and values due the arrival of Christianity and Western education. The clash is significantly depicted with hybridity, for example characters like Nwoye embody the cultural struggle, torn between traditional Igbo values and the allure of Christianity.

The earlier leadership of Okonkwo and villages elders is displaced due to the arrival of colonial administration. The westerners impose their idea of Justice on the Igbo community

without considering the values of the local. Their colonial court system and general law and order disregards Igbo customs, leading to unjust punishments and alienation of the people. They exploit the locals with economic and cultural punishments. When Okonkwo was arrested, the police commissioner demanded cowries from the villagers to release him. Not only they destabilise the local trade but with cash economy they introduce a new economical system that challenges the traditional system of trade and labour. In this way the subjugation is not only cultural but economical too.

The resistance and accommodation of new culture is depicted in sharp contrast to each other. Okonkwo struggle against the colonial presence in the Igbo community represents the resistance of indigenous culture to imperialism and he becomes a symbol of resistance. Some character like Mr. Brown and Nwoye adopt and also align the colonial systems that highlights the complexity and conversion to the responses to colonialism. Alike his father in pre-colonial time his son too submits to colonial powers.

The narrative reclaims the voices of colonial language with its powerful use of Igbo proverbs and idioms. Some of the local flavours are added with myths and tales from the community in English and Nigerian dialects to reclaim the narrative. Thus, challenging the authority of the civilised over the uncivilised. The two languages come in contrast to the each other and the culture as represented through them gets highlighted. Things are falling apart due to the marginalisation of the Nigerian language by the mainstream dominance.

The role of females and the subaltern in the novella has significant drift attached to it. The novella reveals the dynamics of power, gender and cultural hierarchies in pre- and post-colonial Igo society. The study shows how colonial interest intersects with existing patriarchal structures and marginalise both the women and subalterns who are excluded from social power in the . Women are exclusively restricted to domestic chore and roles in the traditional culture. They are excluded from the important meetings and councils in the villages which highlights the fact of their position in the society. Women's value is determined by their ability to bear children particularly sons which is to ensure the continuation of lineage.

Women are symbols of strength and fragility. They are worshipped as Ani, the earth goddess, on the one hand and they are denied agencies of power on the other hand. Okonkwo's treatment of his three wives is considered normal by the villagers, domestic violence, their beating,

following his command reflects how the local power fails to protect women in the novella. While colonial power establishes the traditional structures, it does not uplift the women or subaltern groups leaving them in double disenfranchised margin. Even missionaries who tries to introduce new dynamics by offering new alternative social structures do not succeed in their fundamental alteration of the roles as this redefines the colonial frameworks only.

Silencing the voices of subaltern groups and women redefines how patriarchy and colonialism work hand in hand make the novella overshadowed with male-dominated narrative. Achebe criticises both colonial and patriarchal powers in the novella. Thus the potential of the second sex and marginalised subaltern groups are exposed and their limited emancipation under colonial influence is negated.

The novella further challenges Eurocentric normalcy and portrays African society as rich and organised pre-colonial culturally. They appear uncivilised to the civilised due to the imposition of white western cultural values on them. The sharp challenge is cultivated to the colonial regime by neo-colonialist agenda that sets the novella apart. It is not only a critic of western society but it is also about highlights the local traditions. The imposition of the new religion and social systems that disrupt and fragment the local Igbo culture is show through the lens of loss of identity leading to alienation.

The crisis of masculinity shown in the novella sets the patriarchal normalcy as Okonkwo manhood is challenged by the arrival of the white man on his iron horse. Colonial influences culminate his tragic downfall. He loses it all due to his fear of fall and kills himself. The females and the subalterns in the novella too suffer because of the patriarchal imposed fate. The villagers submit to the colonial power in the end of the novella due to lack of leadership in them and because of the imposition of western white Christian power. Through criticising the colonial Achebe succeeds in exposing the exploitative nature of the colonialism and highlights the destructive of it on the African societies. The novella vividly portrays with intention the physical, psychological and cultural subjugation of the females and the subalterns.

In conclusion, through a post-colonial lens, *Things Fall Apart* is a powerful critique of imperialism and its effects on African societies. It also underscores the resilience and complexity of indigenous cultures, advocating for a re-examination of history from the perspective of the colonized. The novella continues to serve as a cornerstone of post-colonial studies, offering

insights into the enduring legacies of colonialism in the modern world. In short, neither the subaltern Africans nor the females in Nigeria are given proper and due respect and both are painted in grim-grey scale and colour. Perhaps the title echoes the sentiments of this fact and therefore is suggestive. In short, things fall apart because there is no centre to hold them back. However, the centre being in hands of patriarchy and coloniser the second coming in form of liberalisation and freedom or independence is essential. When the old order dies it heralds new hope. It is this hope that makes life worth living for the subalterns and the females.

The novella was followed by two other in the trilogy. They are '*No longer at Ease*' and '*Arrow of God*'. Alike 'Things Fall Apart' they are also about the theme of colonialism and a separate or collective study on/of them can be done.

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