

COLONIAL VIOLENCE IN THINGS FALL APART

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ABSTRACT

Achebe thus contests the idea of Christianity as true religion because to his mind the Igbo religion is as coherent and authentic as the Christian religion. However, this repeats the crime that the Christians commit against the Igbo people as it raises the Igbo way of life and religion as something absolute and irreplaceable. At the heart of the tragedy of the confrontation between the colonialists and the Igbo people is thus the tragic hubris with which they treat one another. It is pride of one's culture, pride of one's identity and being absolute about whose culture is better that seals a violent confrontation and suicide attempts when either side refuses to compromise.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, Colonialism, Violence, Christianity, Assimilation

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a novel about the destruction of a native culture, religion and language by the onslaught of colonialism. The novel questions the premises of colonialism, such as the superiority of Western religion and language by depicting the ruin it has on Onkwonkwo, who is driven to despair and suicide by the effects upon his culture the Christian missionaries bring about, which is a dilution of his native identity and religion. At the heart of *Things Fall Apart* is a question of how native identity is brought to ruin by Western civilisation, and it is a novel that mourns the loss of native, tribal and clan identity when the homogenizing effects of Westernizing civilisation takes place.

At the heart of the novel is the claim that colonialism is a deeply racist and disruptive affair. The novel questions the depiction of the African native as heathen and culturally inferior to the White as the Igbo people are depicted as a people who have a very rich religion and identity prior to the onslaught of colonialism. At the same time the novel emphasizes cultural differences and a resentment that colonialism erases these differences with its homogenizing and imposing effect.

While the loss of culture is lamented, one cannot help but wonder if Achebe is emphasizing too much on cultural differences rather than similarities between one culture and another. Of course it angers Achebe that his native tongue has been superseded by a Western one

but Achebe seems quite absolute in his opposition to the Western tongue and religion when what really happens is not so much the utter replacement of one culture to another but an adaptation and adoption of some aspects of colonial identity while retaining native inflections and interpretations of the new identity.

Hence Achebe seems to have demonized the Westerners in his depiction of them as oppressors rather than liberators and hence in doing so he commits the same crime he accuses the Westerners of committing against him- reifying culture as absolute and irreplaceable when in the modern world it is rather mutual contamination and influence rather than the utter hegemony of one culture over another. At the same time one of course sympathises with what Achebe views as the destruction of his culture and native tongue, and it is anger at the alleged superiority of one culture to another that Achebe opposes. Achebe thus questions the racist assumption that Western culture is superior to all other cultures and this lies at the heart of colonialism.

Onkwonkwo has a deep fear of being characterized as feminine, he asserts his masculinity by winning wrestling contests and amassing barns of yams as well as taking on a few wives and rising to be one of the clan heads. It has been suggested that it is this fear of emasculation and the feminine that proves to be Onkwonkwo's downfall and tragic flaw, indeed Onkwonkwo refuses to be emasculated by the onslaught of British colonialism and thus sees the only recourse as suicide when he tries but fails to inspire an insurrection after killing one of the British supporters at a meeting.

Indeed one can see from the beginning of the novel that Onkwonkwo has tried to overcome his father's bad fortune by being driven and the opposite of being passive and gentle, compensating for his father's failure in life by turning himself into a hypermasculine and aggressive figure. Onkwonkwo overcomes fate by being an aggressor, by refusing to succumb to any situation that life deals him, in a sense he overcomes ill circumstance by creating his own fate aggressively.

But the novel shows that there are limits to how much fate one can create as Onkwonkwo is first expelled from his own tribe for having offended the Gods by assaulting his wife for taking on a lover, and then is overcome by the forces of the British and the High commissioner, who aggressively raze his people's religion and identity to the ground without any respect or consideration for the customs, religion and identity that had preceded their colonial practices because they view the Igbo people's religion as a false religion.

Achebe thus decries the violence of colonialism that desecrates all the sacred customs, religious beliefs and rituals he had held dear from young, it is shown that Christianity while depicted as a religion of mercy is imposed mercilessly on the Igbo people with no respect for their prior religions, customs and beliefs. What Achebe seeks to dispute is the idea that the African native is a blank slate prior to the onslaught of colonialism. Achebe shows that the Igbo people were on possession of a very strong identity and religious beliefs, customs and rituals which the British colonizers have destroyed by mercilessly converting the natives to Christianity.

Achebe thus disputes the Western notion of true religion and one monotheistic God as he believes in preserving the sacred customs and rituals of the Igbo people. The novel is thus an elegiac mourning and nostalgia for a precolonial state, which, though it had its own difficulties and flaws, had preserved the sanctity and the identity of the Igbo people and their religion.

Achebe thus decries the violence of the Western missionaries imposing their religion and system of values on the Igbo people, hence diluting their identity and culturally conquering them to adopt their beliefs and way of life in place of the Igbo religion and the violence with which

this is done, so much so that it drives Onkwonkwo to suicide in trying to resist the destruction of his native religion and culture.

Achebe is thus an anti-humanist, as he opposes the assumption of a universal identity and religion which all people must come to accept to realize themselves. Achebe is deeply protective of his own indigenous identity against the onslaught of the imposition of a Western universal identity and religion which he is deeply suspicious of as he claims that it destroys what it means to be African to him as this colonialism deprives him of his deepest religious beliefs and practices.

At the heart of Achebe's novel is thus postcolonial resistance of the idea of white supremacy and western superiority. Achebe does not believe in yielding to the white universalism in religion because he describes the process as a process of violence which drives Onkwonkwo to despair and suicide because it has razed his identity and religion to the ground.

Yet, as I have mentioned earlier, in doing so Achebe seems to have committed the same crime the Westerners have committed against his culture, in raising his culture and reifying it as something absolute and irreplaceable Achebe is committed to African supremacy just as the whites are committed to white supremacy.

The idea of postcolonial resistance is thus as violent as the colonial imposition of values, in that it raises the precolonial identity to something that is sacred and unmalleable as well as absolute, thus playing down cultural similarities and emphasizing cultural differences and what a crime it is to erase those cultural differences when at heart religions share certain structural similarities despite their cosmetic differences such as the belief in an omnipresent God whom one must appease in order to change one's fate.

This is shown in Onkwonkwo's stubborn resistance to yield and his rigidity in defending his manliness which is shown to be his tragic flaw in the end. It is this refusal to be emasculated by the Westerners with their beliefs and religion that drives Onkwonkwo to suicide. On the other hand, his son, who is less rigid about the Igbo beliefs and customs and rituals, finds a place in the new order by converting to the new religion and finding fulfilment in Christianity.

This thus shows that it is not true that Christianity has been a source for violence for all of the Igbo people. For some, such as Onkwonkwo's son, it is shown that adaptation to the new religion can prove to be something fulfilling as well. Hence it is Onkwonkwo's rigidity and insistence on his masculinity and his refusal to be emasculated by the British that proves to be his downfall.

Onkwonkwo reacts very badly to his son Nwoye's conversion to Christianity. He views it as a kind of betrayal of African identity and is deeply saddened by it. It is thus Onkwonkwo's pride of his mother culture and hypermasculinity that proves to be his downfall in the new colonial order that has ensued as he views this defection to Christianity as a kind of emasculation and betrayal.

Yet, as I have mentioned above, the defection to the new order is not ruin for everyone in the tribe. Some of the tribe successfully assimilate to the new religion and find it fulfilling and beneficial for themselves. It is thus indeed Onkwonkwo's highly rigid stance that nothing in a culture must change that proves to be his downfall and his view of the onslaught of colonialism as a kind of emasculation and a refusal to be reduced to a passive position or an assimilator of the new religion.

It is thus Onkwonkwo's rigid view of assimilation to a new culture as a kind of feminization which he in his hypermasculinity cannot accept which proves to be Onkwonkwo's

downfall. It is thus a kind of masculine pride and refusal to yield to change in power structures that proves to be Onkwonkwo's undoing. He will defend his Igbo religion and identity even to the death, and while some view this as tragic, others might also view it as heroic in Onkwonkwo believes in defending his religion and culture even to the death thus showing him to be fervently nationalistic and refusing to yield to the Colonialist's ideas of white supremacy and white superiority. Onkwonkwo's death is thus defiance of the Colonialists to the bitter end. He refuses to be assimilated and naturalized by white culture because he does not believe in the supremacy of superiority of the West.

Achebe through his depiction of Onkwonkwo's tragedy is thus deeply elegiac of the past rituals, customs and beliefs of the Igbo people which have been brought to destruction by the British colonizers. But this is not to say that Achebe absolutely views the new order in a hostile light.

The Christians are depicted as people who bring a new kind of order to the Igbo people, though this is not necessarily an order which Achebe approves of because while Christianity professes itself to be a religion of mercy, Achebe argues that it has been mercilessly imposed on the Igbo people, thus erasing their identity and bringing it to ruin.

It is not so much Christianity that is the target of Achebe's criticism, but the merciless manner in which it is imposed on the Igbo people without consideration for the sanctity of their previous customs, rituals and beliefs. The Igbo identity is something Achebe views as being diluted and destroyed by the onslaught of the Christian missionaries who in their fervent zeal to spread their religion have no respect or consideration for the previous native religion that had been held in place by the Igbo people.

Achebe thus mourns the passing and loss of the precolonial order which he views as magical while the new order of the Christians is depicted as something that is cruel and to his mind, sterile and deprived of the magic of the Igbo religion.

Achebe can thus be characterized as strongly postcolonial and postmodern in that he would believe in Lyotard's micro narratives in opposition to the Western narrative of progress and universalism which means accommodating all the religions, customs and order of the Western colonialists.

Achebe is strongly defensive of the authenticity of the Igbo religion and culture and Onkwonkwo's suicide can be viewed as defiance of what Achebe views as the inauthentic superimposition of Christian values and beliefs upon the Igbo people. Thus Onkwonkwo's death to Achebe is heroic because it defends the authenticity of the Igbo way of life and refuses to defect to the new religion and order because it is viewed as inauthentic and a betrayal of one's roots.

Indeed what is questioned by Achebe is the idea that no civilisation existed with the Igbo people prior to the coming of Colonialism. The Igbo life is rich with its own beliefs, way of life, system of beliefs, customs, rituals and is depicted as a way of life that is rich and magical prior to the onslaught of colonialism.

It is this authentic way of life that Achebe mourns as something that has been destroyed with the onslaught of colonialism, something that Onkwonkwo defends to his death through suicide which is a premeditated defiance of the new colonial order which he refuses to succumb to because he views it as inauthentic.

Indeed one can see that what Achebe questions is the premise that Colonial values are superior to native values. What Achebe resists is the idea of Western supremacy and superiority.

While this might make Achebe a cultural relativist, what is at stake is Achebe's idea of the authenticity of one's culture and identity. Achebe accuses the Colonizers of destroying the religion and beliefs of the Igbo people which he depicts as something rich and magical prior to the onslaught of the colonizers.

Achebe can thus be seen to be strongly postcolonial as he believes in defending one's roots and authenticity. The tragedy of *Onkwonkwo* is something Achebe ascribes to western violence and a total disregard for the native identity, customs and rituals of the Igbo people. The European missionaries are depicted as ruthless and heartless in imposing their religion on the Igbo people though they claim their religion is a religion of mercy.

What Achebe contests is the idea that the Igbo religion is false religion because it is not Christian. Achebe pays detail to creating a magical system of values, beliefs, rituals and customs that the Igbo people had lived under prior to the onslaught of the Christian missionaries.

Achebe is thus deeply concerned with defending the authenticity of the Igbo way of life and views the Christian missionaries as having no regard for the sanctity of their native religion prior to the onslaught of Colonialism.

Achebe thus contests the idea of Christianity as true religion because to his mind the Igbo religion is as coherent and authentic as the Christian religion. As I have mentioned earlier however, this repeats the crime that the Christians commit against the Igbo people as it raises the Igbo way of life and religion as something absolute and irreplaceable.

At the heart of the tragedy of the confrontation between the colonialists and the Igbo people is thus the tragic hubris with which they treat one another. It is pride of one's culture, pride of one's identity and being absolute about whose culture is better that seals a violent confrontation and suicide attempts when either side refuses to compromise.

Hence while *Onkwonkwo's* death may be viewed as tragic and heroic, it may also be viewed as a kind of hubris, a refusal to be open to new ways of seeing the world and a new order in the world that is coming about with the advent of Western power. *Onkwonkwo's* tragedy is that he refuses to yield to the Christian view of the world because he views it as a betrayal of his roots and identity.

Yet this is not the end that everybody in the Igbo tribe meets. Some are able to assimilate to the new religion and find fulfilment and betterment in the new religion. Hence *Onkwonkwo's* wilful defiance of the Christian order shows that he is convinced of Igbo supremacy, the very crime that he would accuse the Western colonizers as being guilty of. It is thus unyielding pride in one's culture, a refusal to learn from new cultures, a rigid belief in the supremacy of the Igbo way of life that seals *Onkwonkwo's* fate as doomed when the Western colonizers take power.

Yet the Igbo way of life is not shown to be without flaws. *Onkwonkwo* had been expelled from the tribe due to tribal superstitions that he had offended a God, hence it is highly ironic that *Onkwonkwo* defends the Igbo religion to its death. Yet the utter commitment is seen in the way *Onkwonkwo* had experienced tragedy as a consequence of the Igbo religion and yet defended it to his death. At the heart of Achebe's novel is thus a deep pride in the religion and customs of the Igbo people, which will defy Western oppression to defend its sanctity, even unto death.

Work Cited

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