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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THINGS FALL APART: “ COLONIAL NIGERIA HAD ITS OWN FUNDAMENTAL FLAWS THAT WENT AGAINST THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY”

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

In the words of Chimamanda Adichie "The single story creates the stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." This is mainly the reason why Chinua Achebe writes back to the West. In the book "Things Fall Apart" Chinua Achebe portrays Igbo culture vividly and honestly. Unlike Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" Achebe's representation explains intricate customs, rituals and laws and develops individual characters. Through the course of the novel some fundamental flaws with their culture could be seen that played a role in Umuofia's downfall. The reason behind things falling apart was not only the coming of missionaries but also the competition and violence within the clan, blindly following the egugwu concept of masculinity etc. This essay claims to prove that unlike other colonised countries Nigeria had its own fundamental flaws that went against the development of society.

Nigeria and India both had a diverse population when British came in but in India there was a sense of unity, collective identity and a strong foundation of nationality. Therefore, the influence of colonisers was not as much as in Nigeria. Nigeria has a population whose linguistic, ethnic and religious differences overlap on top of each other. Okechukwu Iheduru described Nigeria in the following way. "250 ethnic groups with their distinct languages and cultural characteristics are geographically separated"

Each clan like Umuofia, Mbanta and Abame had their own culture and practices. When people in Umuofia gathered they used to make fun of other clans. When Obierika and his daughter's suitor met they spoke about other clans and said "all their customs were upside down". They described how people in Abame did not decide bribe price. They said that in a clan a man's children belong to his wife and her family. In Nigeria the clans were competitive and each clan wanted to be stronger than the other.

This diversity made it easier for the church to win more converts and to put one against another. Trust was needed so that they all could come together and fight against the British but their customs and differences did not let that happen. Being diverse within a country is incredible but unity in diversity is more important and that was not seen in Nigeria.

In Umuofia masculinity equals virtue and femininity equals weakness. Masculinity has been an integral theme of the novel. The boys in the clans were taught to be tough, strong and controlling. Okonkwo feared being weak. He did not want to end up like his father who in his eyes was a coward. Reputation held the most importance for

Okonkwo. “Age was respected amongst his people, but achievement was revered” (8). Okonkwo thinks that showing emotions is a sign of weakness and hence the only emotion he showed was anger. He wanted his son to be more like him, strong and emotionless. He could not stand Nwoye to be effeminate. “Nwoye knew that it was right to be masculine and to be violent, but somehow he still preferred stories that his mother used to tell him” (53) People had a mindset that men in Umuofia could survive online if they were aggressive, violent and dominant and this thinking made the weaker sections of society go against their culture since they could not handle the pressure. As a result, they converted.

They were so engrossed in being the most powerful amongst their clan that they did not realise that their country was being taken over right in front of their eyes. An example of this will be the infamous slave trade. The slave trade between England, Africa, America could only be practiced because the slaves came from Africa and did not fight back. It made trade of commodities like sugar, coffee and indigo possible. The people of Nigeria were so busy in their own little world which made it easy and smooth for the powerful countries to use Nigeria for their own purposes. This is ironic because the strongest men in Umuofia thought they could not be defeated by anyone but in the eyes of the world they were weak and fragile.

Chinua Achebe does write with sensitivity and empathy towards the Igbo, but he does not hide the fact that many of their rituals and traditions rest on questionable foundations. Ikemefuna was afraid to be a part of a new family. He had been traded for a murder he did not commit himself. This does seem a bit unfair to the readers. The abandonment of infant twins and people with swellings was a custom that was morally incorrect. Nneka is an example of someone who realised such unfairness and converted. She was the mother who gave birth to 4 sets of twins and watched them die in the evil forest.

The people in Umuofia followed the customs and beliefs of their culture blindly and some of them listened to the “Egugwu”. There were others who did question the culture. Nwoye is one of those individuals who actually stood up against the customs of the Igbo society rather than submissively following them. The only other significant character to doubt the culture is Obierika. After Okonkwo is exiled for seven years because of an accidental killing, Obierika ponders “why should a man suffer so grievously for an offence he had committed inadvertently”. He also remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away and thought to himself “what crime had they committed?”. These practices gave a rise to conflicts between the old and new generations.

The concept of “Osu” or outcasts also made the missionaries gain more converts. The Osu were the individuals who were treated like slaves. They were not allowed to marry or achieve any titles. Most of the Osu hence converted since they felt welcomed in the church and were embraced with open arms.

Colonial Nigeria was so different from other colonised countries. It had its very own basic flaws that led it to its downfall. It was those practices that they had been following since so long that became the reason behind things falling apart. Along with all the customs talked about, having a social hierarchy was also amongst the things that led to the overthrow of the Igbo society. In a way people’s selfishness and greed to be the most powerful led Nigeria to be the weakest.

As a result, the downfall of the Igbo society was because of the increasing internal disunity and a brutal culture which has been present since the start. The people stabbed themselves in their back.