A PROTEST AGAINST ETHNIC BIAS: CHINUA
ACHEBE’S \textit{THINGS FALL APART}

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During the colonial rule the Europeans, with an air of racial and cultural supremacy, presented themselves as the givers of culture and sophistication to the other parts of the world. They subjected the colonized people to racial arrogance and cultural denigration. They looked down upon the ‘others’ as inferior, backward, cultureless and even sub human. In Africa, they branded African religions, traditions and customs to be unscientific and superstitious. European philosophers like Hume, Kant and Hegel . . . believed that Negroes were next only to apes . . .”\textsuperscript{1} Hume noted: “I am apt to suspect the Negroes, and in general all other species of men to be naturally inferior to the whites.”\textsuperscript{2} Kant equates blackness with stupidity. He comments: “but in short, this fellow was quite black from head to food, a clear proof that …he …was stupid.”\textsuperscript{3}

Even the panorama of literature was no different. With an exception of very few the Western or Non-African writers ruthlessly presented a distorted picture of Africa. It is owing to either their bias or their notions of cultural supremacy, or, if not so, it is surely because of their lack of clear insight into reality. Sometimes Africa was depicted as a dark continent and a gloomy place where cannibals and bushmen live, a place where reason and logic are absent where fear, superstition and irrationalism rule supreme. Joseph Conrad’s \textit{Heart of Darkness} and Joyce Cary’s \textit{Mister Johnson} project pictures of Africa which can never be acceptable to Africans. Chinua Achebe was greatly hurt at the
“dehumanization of Africa in western imagination.” Achebe resolved to write a full length book such as *Things Fall Apart* to portray the real Africans he was acquainted with and lived with and who were completely different from the Africans depicted by Conrad and Cary. He says: “One of the things that set me thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel, set in Nigeria, *Mister Johnson*, which was clear to me that it was a most superficial picture . . . and so I thought … someone ought to try and look at this from the inside.”

Ridiculing Europeans perception of Africa Achebe points out: “I am not saying that the picture of Nigeria and Nigerians painted by a conscientious European must be invalid. I think it could be terribly valid, just as a picture of visible tenth of an iceberg is valid.”

Achebe however made the best of his creative efforts to underscore the distinguishing features of African culture and its dignity and integrity. He proclaimed that Africans did not receive the idea of culture from the Europeans; they already had their own culture, with its own merits and demerits. Achebe feels that had Africans not been colonized they would have developed and progressed at their own pace, in their own style. Their societies were not mindless but had a philosophy of great depth and value. In *Things Fall Apart* he revealed the complex cultural patterns of African society in general and Ibo community of Nigeria (to which he himself belongs) in particular. David Carol observes that *Things Fall Apart* “is the vivid picture . . . of Ibo society at the end of nineteenth century.”

Ibos lived in tribes. The smallest unit of habitation was a village. Several villages together formed a clan. It was an agricultural community. The community had its own ways and means of dealing with the day to day problems of life. A system to reward or punish a member of the community was embedded in their code. Like any other community Ibos
also had times of hardship and civil crisis. They had moments of leisure, entertainment, ceremonies of social life. Folk tales, songs, dance and music were their activities of recreation. This society was well ordered and it had a council of elders to govern the affairs of the community. Among Ibos the approach to life was democratic. Survival of the fittest was the rule. High ranks and positions were not hereditary. Only the talented could make for the highest place in the tribe. Statements like “Among these people a man was judged according to his worth and not according to the worth of his father”(7) and “Age was respected among his people, but achievement was revered”(8) are self-explanatory. Men who rendered great services to the community were conferred on titles and accorded a special status. Peace was always preferred. War was undertaken only when it was inevitable.

The novel is packed with innumerable episodes that shed light on the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the Ibo culture. The episode of a rich farmer lending seed yams to the poor comrade of his clan shows that the tribal community did not lack the mechanism of mutual co-operation as the present day civilized societies have. Now we have co-operative societies and banking system to lend loans. In agricultural countries like India the farmers who do not have a land make a living through crop sharing and this system is still being practiced. In Ibo society the rich farmers would lend seeds to help the poor ones and thus promote the agricultural sector of the whole community.

Protocols were observed during deliberations and while conducting meetings. Chapter four of the novel records an episode that explains how the social hierarchies were manifested amongst the Ibos. The rich and the strong did not oppress and insult the poor and the weak and if anybody who deviated from the community code of behavior, would be corrected immediately:

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A man had contradicted [Okonkwo] at a kindred meeting … Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: “This meeting is for men.” The man who contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman …. Everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with (the man) Okonkwo said he was sorry for what he said, and the meeting continued. (24)

Meetings were conducted to discuss various issues of the clan. Judiciary was in existence. Okonkwo was heavily fined for beating up his wife during Week of Peace and violating the law of the land. He was also sent into exile for his inadvertent killing of a clansman. In chapter ten it is explained how the elders of the clan find an amicable solution to a case of a disputing couple – Uzoulu and his wife. The dead were buried with honor. If a great man dies the whole village would pay homage.

Woman was given a respectable place. Before engagement the families of bride and bridegroom fully understood one another so that unpleasant events like divorce minimized. Man would pay bride-price to the girl’s parents instead taking any dowry.

Though Africans practiced polygamy precautions were taken so that injustice was not done to each wife. About Okonkwo’s wives it is said that “Each of his three wives had her own hut” (13). Women kept hens and grew small crops in their back yards. They sold their products in weekly markets to buy things like anklets. Thus certain autonomy--social as well as economic--was given to them. The senior wife was always given the first chance to receive any kind of honour. He first wife wears her husband’s signets of honour. When meal is served the first wife’s dish is tasted prior to the dishes prepared by other wives. We see this in Nwakibie’s house. When wine is brought to him, he sends for his wives. “Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her” (18).
Festivals and entertainment were not uncommon among them. There were friendships and associations among them. About Unoka it is said: “If any money came . . . he immediately bought gourds of palm–wine, called round his neighbors and made merry” (4). Ibos were hospitable. Guests were warmly welcomed and respected. When Okeye comes to Unoka’s place he goes in and brings “a small wooden disc containing a Kola nut, some alligator pepper . . . and passed the disc over to his guest” (5). When Okonkwo, the hero of the novel is sent into exile for a crime of inadvertent murder, he is comforted by his maternal uncle, Uchendu, and the other relatives of his mother in his motherland. Okonkwo is given a plot to build his house, his own room and separate huts for his wives. Uchendu’s five sons contribute three hundred seed yams. “In the clan an individual caught in distress enjoys the understanding and protection of the extended family, a custom that is being destroyed by Western impact . . . in India.”

All these minute details about the African culture are brought to light for a non-African reader for the first time through *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe could accomplish this job successfully owing to his first-hand experience of his own culture and mastery over the English language. Therefore, Adewale Maja – Pearce rightly points out that “One of Achebe’s purposes in *Things Fall Apart* is to assert that the . . . values of pre-colonial Africa were in no way inferior to those of Europe, merely different.”

Thus, apart from having myriad themes in it, *Things Fall Apart* essentially, is a document of protest against the ethnic bias to which Africa was subjected.

**References:**

2. Juneja 27.
3. Juneja 27.


