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**African Culture and Colonial Exploitation  
in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart***

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**ABSTRACT**

Africa, with its own cultural values, tribal system and religious background and other features, is a continent where its residents lead their own lives without being restricted. Parental, educational, social and judicial systems of Africa are different from other continents which make it a rich continent to discover. During the first years of colonization, Africa attracted occupier's attention for economic and religious reasons. Exploiter wanted to dominate countries from Africa and change all the values peculiar to that country. Africa, considered savage by occupier, was occupied by exploiter beginning with religion, education and judicial system respectively. Upon the arrival of the occupier, existing life in Africa is altered by the white man claiming that indigenous culture is primitive. Igbo culture, as a part of Nigeria, has its own governmental system, religious beliefs and educational system. The members of this tribe have the autonomy to lead their own lives and they have a say about their own future until the invader arrives. Chinua Achebe- the member of this tribe- tackles the issue of colonization in his novel entitled *Things Fall Apart* and the aim of this paper is to present values of Igbo culture and how invader changes that culture for occupying purposes.

**Key Words:** Chinua Achebe, Igbo, Exploitation, *Things Fall Apart*, Tribe.

**Chinua Achebe'nin *Things Fall Apart*'ında  
Afrika Kültürü ve Sömürge İstismarı**

**ÖZET**

Afrika, kendi kültürel değerleri, aşiret sistemi, dini geçmişleri ve diğer özellikleri ile, sakinlerinin sınırsız bir şekilde kendi hayatlarını yönettiği bir kıtadır. Afrika'nın ebeveyn, eğitim, sosyal ve hukuki sistemleri, keşfedilmesi zengin bir kıta yapan diğer kıtalardan farklıdır. Sömürgeleştirmenin ilk yıllarında Afrika, ekonomik ve dini nedenlerle işgalcinin dikkatini çekti. Sömürücü, Afrika ülkelerine hakim olmak ve o ülkeye özgü tüm değerleri değiştirmek istedi. İşgalci tarafından vahşi olarak kabul edilen Afrika, sırasıyla din, eğitim ve yargı sistemi ile başlayan sömürücü tarafından işgal edildi. İşgalcinin gelişi üzerine mevcut yaşam, yerli kültürün ilkel olduğunu iddia eden beyaz adam tarafından değiştirilir. Nijerya'nın bir parçası olarak, Igbo kültürünün kendi hükümet sistemi, dini inançları ve eğitim sistemi vardır. Bu kabilenin üyeleri kendi yaşamlarını yönetme özerkliğine sahiptir ve istilacı gelene kadar kendi gelecekleriyle ilgili sözleri vardır. Bu kabilenin üyesi olan Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* adlı romanında kolonileşme konusunu ele alıyor ve bu çalışmanın amacı, Igbo kültürünün değerlerini ve işgalcinin bu kültürü işgal amaçları için nasıl değiştirdiğini ortaya koymaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** ChinuaAchebe, Igbo, Sömürü, *Things Fall Apart*, Aşiret.

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## 1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe- as one of the most outstanding authors drawing attention to traditional cultures of indigenous people- was the child of Nigerian family who was converted to Christianity but still believed in their traditional culture. As a result of his strong adherence to his ancestral culture, he rejected the Christian name- Albert- and chose the indigenous one- Achebe- instead. Raised in a family, living according to the native aspects of traditional culture, and educated in English enabled him to shape his ideas from a multicultural approach. Before Achebe was born, Nigeria was colonized by Britain and it was exposed to institutional and cultural oppression. That's why, he came to know both British colonialism and his indigenous culture at the same time.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was published as a reactionary work to Europeans' which reflected the Africans as savages and uncivilized. Europeans, thinking that they had the mission to educate and civilize African, reflected African culture from their own lenses and their Works included biases about the other's culture. For instance, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* describes Africa as a dark and uncivilized continent. Sand-banks, marshes, forests, savages, —precious little to eat fit for a civilized man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no goinga shore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay — cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death— death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here. (Conrad, 2018)

Being aware of the fact that African culture is misrepresented, Achebe presents a deep insight to Igbo society and raises awareness toward it. According to Kenalemang; "Achebe's primary purpose of writing the novel is because he wants to educate his readers about the value of his culture as an African" (2013). Contrary to Europeans' creation of stereotypical ideas, Achebe presents his readers with the religious, cultural and institutional features of Igbo society at the same time the changes created by colonial invasion. Acquainted with both the oppressor's and oppressed cultures, he attempts to direct misleadings of European literary Works into a new portrayal of Igbo society changed dramatically after colonialism. In fact, Achebe's novel as Campu states "challenges the colonial representation and Achebe wants to reinvent national identity as a self-willed return to pre-colonial usable pasts and literary traditions" (2014). As the novel encompasses a new presentation of Nigerian community from Achebe's perspective, *Things Fall Apart* according to Greenberg is the inclusion of story-telling having the functions of assuming pedagogical and realist tasks and showing the texture of life in a lost civilization. (2007).

## 2. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

### 2.1. African Culture and Colonial exploitation in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

*Things Fall Apart* handles cultural values peculiar to Igbo society at the same time, reveals religious, cultural and institutional damages inflicted due to the unexpected arrival of the colonizer. The novel begins with Okonkwo's developed abilities in wrestling and his combatant identity appreciated not only by the inhabitants of Umuofia- the village consisting of nine clans- but also beyond. He could beat even the unbeaten wrestlers, show heroism and farm to feed his family despite the hard times he had during the drought seasons when he started farming. Just from the first chapters of the novel, Achebe attributes to solid personal achievements of his protagonist and tends to present the readers with determination of an indigenous dweller.

Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. He was a wealthy farmer and had two barns full of yams, and had just married his third wife. To crown it all he had taken two titles and had shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars (Achebe, 2017).

During his entire life, Okonkwo is dominated by the idea that he may fail or seem weak, for this reason he has always avoided resembling his father who had no title in life and considered a debtor. In Umuofia, age is respected but although Okonkwo is not an old figure he is valued for his accomplishments. Social interaction and parental relations between the members of Nigerian community are also strongly formed. During his exile for killing one of the boys' during a burial ceremony, Okonkwo's kinsmen inhabiting in his mother's village welcome him to set up a new life. "Okonkwo was given a plot of ground on which to build his compound, and two or three pieces of land on which to farm during the coming planting season. With the help of his mother's kinsmen he built himself an obi and three huts for his wives" (Achebe, 2017). Okonkwo, banished from his village, sometimes feels desperate but his uncle Uchendu reminds him of the hardships he and his daughter have had and heartens him not to lose his hope as he is a father and has responsibilities to fulfill even in exile. "Your duty is to comfort your wives and children and take them back to your fatherland. If you allow sorrow to weigh you down and kill you they will all die in exile" (Achebe, 2017).

In addition to strong parental ties and perseverance to lead honorable lives, the members of Umuofia have their own rules when they encounter conflicts among clans and neighboring villages. Although they have tendencies to battle, they negotiate possible solutions and prevent bloody events likely to happen. Achebe exemplifies one of the situations caused by the murder of a woman from another village- Mbaino. After the murder, as a retaliatory action the crowd shouts for blood but instead of initiating a war, an ultimatum is sent to the other village and a peaceful contract is signed covering the delivery of a young lad called Ikemefuna and a young girl as a wife to man whose wife was murdered. The cases regarding the clashes between husbands and wives are also dealt with equality and a final verdict is given by a committee consisting of the elders of the village. In one of the instances, Uzowulu who is one of the characters claiming that his wife was taken back by her brothers asks for his bride price which is a general rule when a wife deserts her husband. The *egwugwu*, symbolizing the impersonated spirits of ancestors, listens to kinsmen of the woman and reconciles both sides on the condition that the woman is persuaded to return and wine is offered.

Achebe's novel is a successful example of detailing the language used among the members of Umuofia and other villages. He does not aim to revitalize the native language as a disobedience to colonialization but integrates it with English in his novel. Although Achebe expresses his African experiences in English- the language of the colonizer- Leek stresses that; "he preserves its African authenticity" (2001). The indigenous language is not totally used by the author, but many local words and idioms are employed so as to prove that the African community has its own linguistic features. Unlike Europeans, who claim the oppressed not to possess a language, Achebe presents the richness of the native language. The names given to the persons such as Ekwefi, Ezinma and Obierika and the ones given to personal gods like Chi enable the readers to have a better understanding of the authentic presence of the language. Moreover, he advocates the idea that the language is too complex to be translated into English when the interpreter of the missionaries try to translate it. Achebe as one of the most outstanding pioneers of modern African literature conveys a fuller understanding of African culture and voices his people through his novel. Thanks to his novel, people have the opportunity to

hear their own culture by an indigenous author rather than Europeans. Opposed to Europeans' treating Africans primitive and cultureless, Achebe expresses that the people are not disbelievers and they have their own personal gods one of which is Chi. He puts forward that the ones with bad chi were compulsorily taken to Evil Forest and left to die without a burial ceremony whereas respected persons like Okonkwo are honored owing to the good god they have.

Achebe on one hand, has the tendency to prove the existence of an indigenous culture in Nigeria, on the other, he highlights how colonialists destroy religion, judicial system and culture in Umuofia and other villages. In the context of colonization, and how it affected third world countries in general and Africa in particular, Achebe starts his novel with Yeats' poem titled "The Second Coming" "Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer; Things Fall Apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" (Yeats, 2018).

The first arrival of the white man is sudden and he first appears in one of the clans called Abame. He is riding a kind of iron horse attributing to the vehicle he used to arrive at the village and he frightens the first people who come across with him. The result of the consultancy to the Oracle, the elders decide to kill him and tie his iron horse for the fear that it may get away and inform his friends. Upon white the man's arrival, Oracle prophesizes that the occupier, resembled to locusts, will come in greater numbers. "I forgot to tell you another thing which the Oracle said. It said that other white men were on their way. They were locusts, it said, and that first man was their harbinger sent to explore the terrain". (2017) As soon as the white man begins to settle, he tries to convert the religion through the construction of churches. It is alleged by the white man that the people of Africa worshipped false gods of wood and stone and they would be thrown to fire.

Justifying the exploitation, white man states that he is in Africa for the salvation of the race by saying; "We have been sent by this great God to ask you to leave your wicked ways and false gods and turn to him so that you may be saved when you die" (2017). At first, people, unwilling to listen to their preachings, witness that there are some converts and the social link is ruined. As concrete instance, Nwoye, objecting the sacrificial of Ikemefuna, is among the converts and Okonkwo rejects his own son. The missionaries gradually set their own colonial system by establishing a new governmental administration. The natives, threatened by stronger iron horses, are hanged, the elders are punished after the burning of the church, they are forced to work clearing the government compound. The prisons they built are full of those who disobeyed the white and they are exposed to violence. The abominable occupation captures people and clashes occur causing desperation in the clans. After a seven year old exile, Okonkwo returns his village but he realizes that everything has changed. The territory is under the domination of the oppressor and some lands are given to people who pay much money to missionaries. Known for his courage and loyalty to his nation, Okonkwo wants to fight against the oppressor, who once did not dare to face his ancestors, and drive them from their own land but the situation is so dramatic that even the brothers, considering their customs bad, have taken up white man's religion and lost their abilities to act like one. Achebe voices Obierika in order to underline the impossibility of defiance by stating; "now he has won our brothers. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart" (2017). The unity of the clans is destroyed and even the great warrior is not able to activate his nation's patriotic feelings. After the destruction of the church, Okonkwo heartens his clan to fight the missionaries and use violence. Achebe like Frantz Fanon prioritizes violence as it is the only language which the oppressor understands. For this reason, his protagonist Okonkwo and the members of Umuofia come together to take a substantial step as they did the previous night by burning the church but as a result of the tricks

of the District Missionary the leaders including Okonkwo are handcuffed, shaved and imprisoned. They are not allowed to drink, eat and urinate for three days. White man's "peaceful administration" (Achebe 2017:78) alleged to make indigenous people happy causes them to suffer and demands ransom and threatens them to be hanged. The confrontation of two poles- white man and Nigerians- is problematic and violent. Okonkwo trusting the inner rebellious energy of his nation is frustrated as he sees cowardice overwhelms them. Achebe's the -great warrior- hangs himself and more tragically he is not buried by his clansmen as suicide means that the body is demonized. Not only does colonizer exploit the territory but also drives honored figures to give an end to their lives instead of living like slaves.

### 3. Conclusion

As a result, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* opposes European's idea that Africa is a continent without culture, religion and humanity. Achebe presents his readers with values of his nation at the same time how the values have been destroyed by colonization. Igbo tribe is presented as a rich culture with its own unique features. Relations between the members of the tribe may be regarded primitive by Europeans but Achebe contends that the indigenous people of Africa are the ones who must have a voice about their own destinies and life styles.

Colonialists resembled to locusts invaded Nigeria justifying their occupying by claiming that they have the mission to civilize African people. Education, religion and government of Igbo culture are forced to change and indigenous people have no other alternative but to convert.

Invaders massacre the rebel and the community is fallen apart. Not only the brotherhood but also the solidarity is ruined and all the values forming the Igbo culture are destroyed which creates a fragmentary society at the end.

Achebe as a post-colonial writer on one hand presents the devastating effects of invasion on the other draws the attention of his readers to the impossibility of reconstructing the previous values combining the African community. He is well aware of the fact that native essence of his community is lost as a result of the European invasion but he proves the capability of an African writer to produce literary works as well.

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