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IGBO IDENTITY: A READING OF CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART* AND *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

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Abstract

*Identity is a construct and it changes over time and space. Language plays a very important role in the de-construction/construction of identities. In this paper an attempt would be made to study Igbo identity as depicted in Chinua Achebe's fiction *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. The paper would study the characteristics, feelings and beliefs of the Igbo community and see how they contribute to the establishment of their identity. The trajectory that this paper would follow would be from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). An attempt would be made to observe the shifts and changes that come to the Igbo community in general and the Igbo identity in particular during that period. In this paper an attempt would also be made to show why and how such shifts and changes come to the Igbo society. Precisely, the approach in the paper shall be- to understand what the Igbo identity is, how it has changed in the course of time and space, why it has changed. In the process the paper shall also examine if there is any politics on the part of the author in establishing and highlighting the Igbo identity. The paper shall also try to focus on the author's attempt of retrieving the past for enhancing the sense of identity in the Igbo people.*

Key Words: Identity, language, de-construction, community, retrieval etc.

Of course all identities are constructed and therefore highly variable over space and time...

- Sean Hawkins and Philip D. Morgan. ¹

... identity becomes an issue when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.

- Kobena Mercer. ²

This paper is an attempt to study Igbo identity as depicted in Chinua Achebe's fiction *Things Fall Apart* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. I shall try to study the characteristics, feelings and beliefs of the Igbo community and see how they contribute to the establishment of their identity. The trajectory that I am going to follow is from *Things Fall Apart* (1958) to *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). I shall try to observe the shifts and changes that come to

the Igbo community in general and the Igbo identity in particular during that period. My paper shall also be an attempt to show why and how such shifts and changes come to the Igbo society. Precisely, my approach shall be- to understand what the Igbo identity is, how it has changed in the course of time and space, why it has changed. In the process I will also see if there is any politics on the part of the author in establishing and highlighting the Igbo identity.

The term 'identity' as I see in this paper constitutes the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that distinguish a group of people from others. With this stance in mind, let us try to study the characteristics, feelings and beliefs of the Igbo community and see how they distinguish it from other communities and give it a separate essence, that is, the Igbo identity. How Achebe conceives the African culture or the African identity is made very clear in his lecture entitled "The Role of the Writer in a New Nation,"³ delivered to the Nigerian Library Association in 1969. Here he asserts that the African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry, and above all, they had dignity. Further in the lecture he specifically mentions that it is inconceivable to him that a serious writer could stand aside from the debate— the debate between the 'whites' and 'blacks'. So it is expected that Achebe is going to emphatically highlight the identity of the Igbo people in his novels. While doing so there might be some politics on his part, which shall be discussed in the latter part of my paper.

Countering the European allegation against Africa, that there is no social system or order there, Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* shows that the Igbo's are a 'pluralistic'⁴ and 'egalitarian'⁵ society. K. Indrasena Reddy in the essay "Return to the Roots: *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*" says that unlike in different parts of Nigeria, the institution of Chieftdom is somewhat unfamiliar among the Igbo's. In that society the decision making power or authority normally rests with the community itself. A group of elders arbitrate public disputes and their authority is never challenged. In case of a dispute the elders allow the contending parties to present their cases and thereafter pronounce a verdict that is not only fair to the parties, but also helps in preserving the solidarity of the community. In the text we see that the case of the murder of an Umuofia woman, Ogbuefi, Udo's wife is resolved in this manner. Again, when the peace of the community is threatened by the excesses of the fanatical Christians, a meeting is called and there is a consensus as to how the society should respond.

Further in *Things Fall Apart* we see that each Igbo village, like Umuofia, Mbaino, Mbanta, Abame etc., is an autonomous political unit. These villages are interlinked and integrated into one another by means of marriages, titled men, Oracles and shrines. Marriages in the Igbo community are generally exogamous and exogamy serves as an integrative factor linking several villages creating "a system of affiliations and communications larger than that of the autonomous village."⁶ We see that in Umuofia marriage is more than an affair between two individuals; it is union of two family groups.

Marriages there are contracted after elaborate negotiations and public ceremonies, as is exemplified in the *uri* ceremony of Akueke, Oberika's daughter.

Denying the European belief that primordial chaos reigns in the African society Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* depicts an Igbo society where there are clearly defined parameters of right conduct on both personal and communal levels. The ethics of the African community portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* can be summarized as follows: Live and let live. This concept is repeated very often especially during prayers that accompany the breaking of kola nuts: "He broke the kola-nut saying: we shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness... Let the kite perch and the egret perch too." (*TFA*, 1958: 119)

The ethics of the Igbo community portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* encourage the individuals to work hard in order to succeed in life; hence in Umuofia an individual's achievement is rated more highly than age or ancestry. Thus Okonkwo, who raises himself in life by dint of hard work, is highly respected in his society. Although the society encourages people to strive to be successful in life, it takes care to shield the weak from the strong by restraining the mighty from intimidating their less fortunate neighbours. When Okonkwo calls one of his kinsman Osugu, a woman, he is made to apologize for his unguarded remark. Further, the Igbo society that one sees in *Things Fall Apart* is so highly organized that the society even has a Week of Peace when all are constrained to be at peace with their neighbours, no matter what. Above all, this society is so ethical that it makes the distinction between just and unjust wars. As a result, although Umuofia is a war like community, it never fights an unjust war: "And in fairness to Umuofia it should be recorded that it never went to war unless its case was clear and just" (*TFA*, 1958: 9)

Fellow feeling among the people is a very important characteristic of the Igbo community. It is a society in which someone at the beginning of his career can go to an elder and obtain without any collateral the resources with which to establish himself in life. Okonkwo who didn't have the good fortune of inheriting any legacy from his father had to borrow some seeds from an elder to start his cultivation.

Sean Hawkins and Philip D. Morgan in their introduction to *Black Experience and Empire* argue that all identities are constructed and therefore highly variable over space and time. Let us see if this be true in the case of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. It is said that Achebe felt provoked by the writings of Conrad (*Heart of Darkness*) and Joyce Cary (*Mister Johnson*). They appalled him as their novels seek to portray the African in terms of a savage. Achebe takes on himself the responsibility to rectify the savage image of the African as discernible in European writings. We see that Conrad and Cary construct the identity of Africa as a land of savages who do not have any worthwhile culture or civilization. On the other hand Achebe denouncing their claim portrays Africa, and more precisely the Igbo community, as having an admirable culture and civilization. We feel that Achebe, unlike the other two, gives an authentic interpretation of Africa, for he is an insider. But the important question is that is it prudent on our part to take everything that Achebe tells at face value? I have no intention to oppose what Achebe says but at the same time it cannot be totally denied that there might be

some politics on his part in portraying the Igbo identity. And that may be because he is too emotionally attached to his community and gets severely disturbed by the denigration of his society by foreigners who do not even have a proper knowledge of his community. We cannot blame Achebe for the stand he takes. For Fanon says: "But the war goes on; and we will have to bind up for years to come the many, sometimes ineffaceable wounds that the colonialist onslaught has inflicted on our people." (*The Wretched of the Earth*, 2001: 200) Fanon's words may seem a bit too harsh to a First World critic but the fact remains that the "wounds" have been inflicted and the postcolonial writer cannot but write about these wounds.

It is worth mentioning here that Achebe, in his commitment to highlight the identity of the Igbo community, does not hesitate to point out the flaws, which are also part of the African legacy; for instance, abandoning of the twins and sick in the Evil Forest as they are an abomination to the earth, and ritual of human sacrifices to appease the deities. He does not romanticize Igbo society nor abuse Christian European behaviour as a whole. He lays bare both the strength and weakness of the Igbo community. He perhaps, through his novels, tries to show that social change in Africa was inevitable and points out the necessity of adaptation to the new environment.

'Identity' is not static; it keeps changing with time and space. The identity of the Igbo community too is not monolithic. We notice that it gradually changes when it comes into contact with the Colonizer's culture. And it seems that Achebe perhaps desires such a positive change in the Igbo society. This message is very explicit in his novels, that he wants the Igbo people to assess both their own culture and the culture of the colonizers, acquire and adopt the good qualities of both and discard the bad. If this be so, it is very obvious that the Igbo identity will be constantly in the process of change, of course for the better, and perhaps Achebe wants this (striving for the better attitude) to be the very identity of the Igbo identity. In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe shows that Okonkwo has to meet his sad fate because his perception of reality was one dimensional, his assessment of the changing situation was erroneous, and he lacked a full understanding of his people and their culture. He takes an impulsive decision and beheads the head-messenger sent by the colonizer's court. At earlier times Okonkwo's act would have been regarded as a great act of valour but time has changed. Other members of his community like Obierika have realized that the colonizers are far more powerful than them; it would be foolish on their part to fight against them. Unfortunately Okonkwo fails to realize that and hence meets his fate. He perhaps forgot the proverb of the Igbo community that the soup that is hot should be taken slowly. Other members of his community at least tried to see if there was any bright aspect in the colonizers culture but Okonkwo totally ignored any such possibility. Hence we see in the course of the novel that the Igbo society, with its encounter with the colonizers, gradually changes and hence comes a change in their identity. The Igbo people have realized that it is impossible to drive away the colonizers by physical force; they must use a different method to do the same. In fact, in the latter part of the novel, the incident of Obierika's making the messengers of the District Commissioner bring down the dead body of Okonkwo and bury it can be interpreted as their

way of making the colonizers look undignified. Though of course there is a custom in the Igbo community that a corpse of a person who has committed suicide should not be buried by his clansman; some stranger should do it for them.

Further, when the culture of the natives encounter with the culture of the colonizers, an eventual change come to the religious belief of the former. We see that many people, initially and particularly the social outcast, were getting themselves converted into Christianity. This shift would definitely bring a change in the traditional Igbo identity. For many people, unlike Okonkwo, in the Igbo community began to examine the new religion of the colonizers and see if something could be gained from it.

There are many men and women in Umofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. ...even in the matter of religion there was a growing feeling that there must be something after all, something vaguely akin to method in the overwhelming madness.

- (TFA, 1958: 128)

Anuradha Ghosh opines, as cited in Mala Pandurang edited *Chinua Achebe: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, that the ambivalent modernity that the post-colonial nations experience makes the exercise of cultural re-writings of histories an exploration into the myriad complexities that enmesh societies trying to live on their own terms. She further questions that what does it really mean to live on one's own terms? The retreat of European colonialism was not a complete one anywhere in the world. The rise of global empires under the aegis of one or the other imperial power makes the question of cultural sovereignty a near impossibility. Hence the question of identity, whether it is the individual's identity or the community's identity, becomes more problematic. Though there is an end to colonial rule the world over, a new form of global subjugation, the concept of imperialism has ushered in. Imperialism⁷ is a form of colonization that rules through the power of transnational finance capital leading to the era of colonialism without colonies. The newly independent Nigeria is perhaps finding it difficult to cope with this form of imperialism. The state of turmoil in Nigeria speaks aloud of this. The collapse of the Nigerian State machinery, the breakdown of all democratic institutions, the increasing economic divide between the people, poverty, disease and hunger create a horrifying spectacle of violence. It seems that all ideals that the nation in its process of coming into being ever stood for is shattered. Achebe in his novels *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *A Man of the People* (1966) critique this state of affairs of the Nigerian nation. While *A Man of the People* is a satire on corruption, and power struggles in the 1960s, the story of Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* deals with conflicts of values over moral issues. The missionary upbringing that Obi had received and the four years in England that he spent while completing his B. A. made him develop a perspective that was quite opposed to the tribal world where he belonged. Hardly did the elders of his clan realize that "...the process of education is... complex. Not only has it raised his status, it has done something to his personality, something which he cannot reverse even if he would..." (NLE, 1966: 84) His conflict with tribal ethics and morality surfaces when he expresses his wish to

marry Clara, a beautiful girl from the Osu community with whom marital relationships are outlawed as they are a banished clan. Obi Okonkwo is suffering from an identity crisis. His ambivalence arises out of the sense of dislocation that he finds himself in. He is neither an outsider nor an insider to his culture as his changed consciousness makes him critical of both the worlds. He might want to identify himself with the white men, but at the same time he is apprehensive that the white men might not embrace him. We can perhaps say that the identity crisis in Obi Okonkwo represents in microcosm the identity crisis of the Igbo society of that time. Regarding Obi Okonkwo's identity crisis what Fanon says in *Black Skin, White Masks* is pertinent:

I analyzed my heredity; I made a complete audit of my ailment. I wanted to be typically Negro- it was no longer possible. I wanted to be a white- that was a joke. And when I tried, on the level of ideas and intellectual activity, to reclaim my negritude, it was snatched away from me.

- (*Black Skin, White Masks*, 1986: 132)

Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* continues his critique of the nation after independence. It suggests in a West African context that the fortunes of the nation have been damaged by a chauvinistic educated elite separated from the bulk of the people by education, class, power and privilege. The sense of community which was very strong in the traditional Igbo community was diminishing. Regarding the sense of community of the Igbo people Mbiti once said, "I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am." (Mbiti, 1969: 108-109) Achebe perhaps tries to show that the sense of community is still necessary for the progress and development of a nation. The Western-educated elite alone, without the support of the common man, cannot bring progress to a nation. Elewa's uncle's remarks are pertinent in this context. He says that Kangan has been a troubled nation since independence "because those who make plans make plans for themselves only and their families." (AS, 1987: 212) Any kind of chauvinism must be repudiated. All must work together for the progress of the nation and only then will the Igbo identity be consolidated in the world.

It is believed that the Igbo society is a patriarchal society and that they treasure their sons more highly than their daughters. In that society woman has very less voice and are always subordinate to men. The same accusation is made against Achebe's novel. Therefore, perhaps Achebe tries to give Beatrice a dominant voice and an indelible identity in *Anthills of the Savannah*. John McLeod in the essay "The nation in question: Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*" says that borrowing some terms from Homi Bhabha, we could describe the naming ceremony as a moment when the performative interrupts the pedagogical. The baby naming ceremony, in the Igbo society, has solemn and fixed protocols, yet in the final scene at Beatrice flat a different kind of ceremony is performed. Although it takes place on the seventh market day, as tradition dictates, other rules are broken. A male is supposed to perform the naming, but instead Beatrice decides to 'improvise a ritual' (AS, 1987: 206) and conduct the naming herself. The name that is chosen, Amaecina ('The remnant shall return'), is a boy's name, but Elewa dismisses this incongruity: 'Girl fit answer am also.' (AS, 1987:

206) The naming of Amaechina depicts a reconfiguration of conventional gender roles so that the mapping of the future can be the result of the efforts of both men and women. As the daughter of the subversive writer Ikem and market girl Elewa, Amaechina is perhaps symbolic of a new egalitarian life for the nation that repudiates the chauvinism and exclusivity of the Western-educated elite. So we see that there comes a definite change in the Igbo community from the time of *Things Fall Apart* to *Anthills of the Savannah*. There comes both a positive (status of women have improved in the Igbo society) and negative (diminish in the sense of the community and increase in chauvinism) changes to the Igbo society.

The method by which Achebe wants to construct the past of the Igbo society is the process of retrieval. Amina Amin in her essay "Race-retrieval in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" says that after reading of Achebe's novels one has a feeling that he has taken upon himself the moral role of a 'teacher' or an 'interpreter' to retrieve his race, to recover what has been repressed and denigrated by dominant forms of cultural productions and coloured by Eurocentric biases. It is as if he wants to bring back an entire society into the folds of history. Wole Soyinka, as cited in Jasbir Jain edited *Contesting Post-colonialism*, observes that the situation in most African countries needs a double retrieval, first from the colonial deniers of their past but also from the black neo-colonial deniers of their immediate past and present. In this context we may say that in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe is primarily engaged with retrieving the history of his race from the imperial deniers of his past and in his successive works like *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* he examines the consequences of the black neo-colonial denial of his country's immediate past and present.

The control over language has always been an important factor that made imperial domination over the colonies possible. It was through the language of the rulers that the concepts of 'truth', 'reality', 'universality' etc were established as the only valid ones. And such concepts dominated the minds of the people even after the political domination of the rulers ended. As we have seen a major feature of Achebe's novels is his concern with the crisis of identity a particular community experiences because its culture is being gradually and systematically denigrated and a 'supposedly superior' cultural model is imposed. Again in his novels it is likely that the Igbo community might experience a sense of linguistic alienation, because through its educational system, the Empire has sought to impose on the colonized an alien language which is incapable of bearing the burden of their experience. Hence perhaps Achebe thinks that there is the need of writers like him who can transform the language of the masters and mould it in such a way that it becomes an apt vehicle for expressing the geographical or physical conditions of their land and also their socio-cultural practices. Amina Amin in her essay "Race-retrieval in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" says that the "political orientation" and "experimental formulations" of *Things Fall Apart* seem to have been deliberately designed to counteract Western/European hegemonic domination. It is as if Achebe is challenging the European master narrative and offering an alternative both in terms of the metaphysical system of his culture as also the narrative strategies he has employed to represent the multi-centeredness of human life. Helen Tiffin puts it succinctly. "In *Things Fall Apart* Western historicizing is kept at bay while the

complexity and communal destiny of culture through proverbs, seasonality, festivals, rituals, multitheism, and power-balancing and power-sharing are established.” (Tiffin, 62)

The shifts and changes that come to the Igbo society from the time of *Things Fall Apart* to that of *Anthills of the Savannah* make us realize and convince us that ‘identity’ is a construct; it changes over time and space. Achebe is well aware of this fact. He therefore being a committed writer to the cause of the nation, a moralist, a teacher, through his novels urges, the Igbo society in particular and the Africans in general, to have a proper understanding of the contemporary world scenario and adapt themselves according to that. Only then he believes will the progress of the Igbo society and survival of the Igbo identity be possible.

Abbreviations Used in My Paper.

TFA *Things Fall Apart*
AS *Anthills of the Savannah*
NLE *No Longer at Ease*

Notes:

1. Sean Hawkins and Philip D. Morgan says this in their essay “Blacks and the British Empire: An Introduction” in the book *Black Experience and the Empire*.
2. Kobena Mercer, as cited in *A Glossary of Cultural Theory* (Second Edition) by Peter Brooker, says this.
3. This is cited from the essay “Literature and Social Change: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*” from the book *African Literature Today*.
4. The term is used by K. Indrasena Reddy in the essay “Return to the Roots: *Things Fall Apart* and *The River Between*” in his book *The Novels of Achebe and Ngugi: A Study in the Dialectics of Commitment*.
5. The term is used by Clement Okafor in the essay “Igbo Cosmology and the Parameters of Individual Accomplishment in *Things Fall Apart*”, which occurs in Isidore Okpewho’s edition of *Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart: A Casebook*.
6. David Carroll, *Chinua Achebe* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1980), p. 14.
7. This definition of imperialism is quoted from Anuradha Ghosh’s essay “The Notion of Identity Formation and the Paradigm of Cultural Resistance in the Novels of Chinua Achebe”.

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