ACHEBE AND SOYINKA: AN ANALOGY OF THEIR SOCIAL AND EXISTENTIAL DEFIANCE

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Abstract

The assertion depicts the comparative existential attitude of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka with reference to their major literary work Things Fall Apart and The Lion and The Jewel respectively. Achebe’s influential novel Things Fall Apart represents a culture altering because British missionaries and ultimately British culture move into and change the Igbo community though the culture and people had their own set of rules to follow and penalty for those who refused to comply. They show African rustic life that explores the conflicts between traditional and modern values, third world authenticity against first world principles, and the power of invaders against the colonized. They both depict the post-colonial Africa, where modernity and tradition are in constant conflict. Thus, they create characters challenging themselves in an atmosphere interspersed with the wardens of modernism in one faction and those who are deeply rooted in the traditions and customs on the other flank.

Key words: Existentialism, Individuality, Marginalization, Being African.

Introduction

Born just four years apart, the two Nigerian writers Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have defined African culture with their poems, plays and novels for more than half a century. They are simultaneously similar and distinct. Brodie (2013) says that “they share an index of national historical phenomena from the history of colonization and independence, which came to Nigeria in 1960 to the continued political struggles.” Things Fall Apart is the realistic representation of some African beliefs, practices and norms which are worthy of withholding and communication to other African societies in the Diaspora. The prevailing tone of the novel is ironic, tragic, and satirical and to some extent, fable-like by which Achebe exposes the severe existentialism of African culture, tradition and individualism. In essence, Things Fall Apart is pretty much an assorted pack. Chinua Achebe presents his audience with an interesting twist to a contemporary school of thoughts in his novel. This post-colonization narrative incorporates several traits that revolt against normative philosophic systems, theories and beliefs of the existence of man and his place in the universe. In the play The Lion and the Jewel, there is a confrontation between the tradition and modernity. The researcher relates the modernity to the influence of British culture on Nigerian way of life. Lakunle who stands for change in the play is facing a challenge with Baroka who stands for the tradition. The conflict in this study has different sides. So, it may be as a result of generation gap, or education or age (old and new) or mind and belief. The conflict may exist among the characters themselves. As the main theme of Soyinka is the conflict between tradition and modernity, the play shows the intimacy of Soyinka with the various aspects of African traditions. On the one hand, the play also shows the influence of the modern world on the African mind. On the other hand, the play focuses on the failure of an elementary school teacher to apprehend the sense of culture and advancement.

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Objective

The principal objective of this ephemeral study is to compare the existential attitude of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka with reference to Achebe’s world-winning novel *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka’s fabulous play *The Lion and the Jewel*. This paper also includes their analogous presentation of their post-colonial approach.

Literature Review

Based on the criticism of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, some critical essays and analysis published in the shapes of different books and in many literary journals are very useful as the supporting materials for further study. Different critical books composed by – S.C. Sinha, Shakti Batra, Dr. S. Sen, Cliffs and Coles etc remain helpful for the part of the study on the two literary works. Moreover, the different literary web sites of internet are also helpful in this regard. The prominent modern novelist Chinua Achebe is versatile and universal in existentialism of his culture and tradition. The novel keeps a greater impression on modern people. This work will find out the severe African existentialism reflected in this literary work.

Methodology

In fact, the only supportive method was ‘Observation Method’ for this research work. By using this method, the researcher has gone through literary articles, critical compositions, and websites to find related study materials, in order to be acknowledged in the related topic and will also collect critical journals from different libraries to have specialized information on the authors and compose the work in a more credible way.

Discussion

**Existentialist ideology of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka**

Achebe’s style, although peculiar in one sense, can be defined in relation to the school of philosophic thought known as existentialism. Some of Obierika’s musings are particularly existential, particularly when Okonkwo is banned from the tribe for seven years for the accidental murder of a clansman. He also laments about the custom of killing and desecrating twins, among other traditions that don't entirely make sense but are done out of tradition and trust in older generations. Achebe addresses a variety of issues including child raising, dealing with European colonialism and cultural pride.

Likewise, Soyinka seeks to satisfy his thirst for Afro-centricity by applying many methods, which are in African origin, in his play *The Lion and The Jewel*. The play draws on Nigerian traditional poetry, music, and dance. It is needless to say that this play enabled the Nigerian drama to become part of the world theater. He introduces two male characters and by them, he introduces two worldviews; the Afrocentric view and the Eurocentric view. Hence, the play turns to be a kind of ideological war between these two poles; and furthermore, Soyinka adds another important character who is a female to mediate the conflict. (Moawad 2016)

In Wole Soyinka’s play, we find the essence of African culture and tradition which is not demolished by the domination of British Empire. The characters of this drama show the core essence of the livelihood of the people of Nigeria.

Findings

**Individuality of Language**

In demonstrating the imaginative, often formal language of the Igbo, Achebe emphasizes that Africa is not the silent or incomprehensible continent that books such as *Heart of Darkness* made it out to be. Rather, by speckling the novel with Igbo words, Achebe shows that the Igbo language is too complex for direct translation into English. Similarly, Igbo culture cannot be understood within the framework of European colonialist values. Achebe also points out that Africa has many different languages: the villagers of Umuofia, for example, make fun of Mr. Brown’s translator because his language is slightly different from their own. (Spark-notes Editors 2017)
It is intensely significant that both Achebe and Soyinka chose to write *Things Fall Apart* and *The Lion and The Jewel* respectively in English they clearly intended their literary works to be read by the West at least as much, if not more, than by his fellow Nigerians. Soyinka also presents his Yoruba language as musical, which is also considered to be chanted rather than spoken. The wealth of images, proverbs, and folkloric motifs survives the transplantation to foreign forms of Soyinka’s work. (Batra 2007) Their goal was to evaluate and alter the portrait of Africa that was smothered by so many writers of the colonial period. Doing so required the use of English, the language of those colonial writers. Through their inclusion of proverbs, folktales, and songs translated from the Igbo language, Achebe and Soyinka managed to capture and convey the rhythms, structures, cadences, and beauty of the Igbo language. Thus the two authors expose their vehement attitude towards African existentialism in outer world.

**Marginalization of women**

A factor that hastens the decline of the traditional Igbo society is their custom of marginalizing some of their people allowing the existence of an outcast group and keeping women subservient in their household and community involvement, treating them as property, and accepting corporal abuse of them somewhat frivolously. When delegates of a foreign culture enter Igbo province and accept these marginalized people including the twins at their full human value, the Igbo’s traditional shared guidance finds itself unable to control its whole population. The lack of a clear, sustaining center of authority in Igbo society may be the quality that decided Achebe to draw his title from the Yeats poem, *The Second Coming*. The key phrase of the poems reads, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.”

Soyinka’s play also has this theme of marginalization of women as property. Traditionally, they were seen as properties that could be bought, sold or accumulated. Even the modern Lakunle falls victim to this, by looking down on Sidi for having a smaller brain, and later by thinking it will be easier to marry her once she’s lost her virginity, since no dowry was required in such a situation.

**African proverbs**

In Achebe’s culture they used proverbs in order to communicate and to use a more elevated style, to be clear and make vocabulary more interesting. A few of the examples of those proverbs can be illustrated here:

In chapter one, Unoka uses a phrase to say that he will pay his biggest debtors before the smallest in this proverb, “Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.” In chapter four, we get a proverb that “Those whose palm-kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble.” It means that people, who are blessed with luck by the gods, should be humble, and not criticize other people. In chapter eight, we find a moral proverb that “A child’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm.” It signifies the fact that the children obeying their mother are not punished. In chapter sixteen, we get another truth that if one’s power is too great, things next to it will not have enough room to grow properly. Achebe depicts this phrase as “Living fire begets cold, impotent ash.” He means the fact that because of Okonkwo’s great aptitude, his son could not become great.

Towards the end of the play, Baroka is attempting to woo Sidi and shows her the machine that makes stamps. He tells Sidi that her image will adorn each stamp leaving Ilujinle, then expresses his thoughts about progress and modernity. Sidi mentions that Baroka sounds like the school teacher and Baroka says, "the proof of wisdom is the wish to learn even from children. And the haste of youth must learn its temper from the gloss of ancient leather, from a strength knit close along the grain" (Soyinka, 53). Baroka uses the African proverb to explain to Sidi that he and the school teacher must learn from one another.

When Sidi is speaking with Baroka, Baroka mentions that his favorite wife had harmed him, and Sidi asks if his wife was in any way dissatisfied. Baroka initially comments that he does not have time to worry about what upsets women, then changes his tone and tells Sidi to not make him feel like an old
ram. He tells Sidi that he will not allow her to watch him wrestle and references an African proverb by saying, "The woman gets lost in the woods one day and every wood deity dies the next" (Soyinka, 42)

**Parallel post-colonial themes**

Alteration of convention is a very important theme in *Things Fall Apart*. As a story about a culture on the verge of change, the novel deals with how the prospect and reality of change affect various characters. The tension about whether change should be privileged over tradition often involves questions of personal status. Okonkwo, for example, resists the new political and religious orders because he feels that they are not manly and that he himself will not be manly if he consents to join or even endure them. To some extent, Okonkwo’s confrontation of cultural change is also due to his fear of losing societal existence. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. Throughout the novel, Achebe shows how reliant such traditions are upon storytelling and language and thus how quickly the desertion of the Igbo language for English could lead to the abolition of these rituals.

The most prominent theme of *The Lion and The Jewel* is the rapid modernization of Africa, coupled with the rapid evangelization of the population. This has driven a chink between the conservatives and the modernists, who like to see the last of obsolete customary credence in any way. This ideology depicts author’s post-colonial attitude vividly. There is also the conflict between education and traditional beliefs. Finally, there is the importance of song and dance as a form of spreading information in a world where the fastest route of communication is by foot. It is an attempt to uphold their conventional culture and tradition before the post-colonial world.

**Analogous concept of personal gods and religious beliefs**

The concept of *chi* is discussed at various points throughout the novel *Things Fall Apart* and is important to our understanding of Okonkwo as a tragic hero. The *chi* is an individual’s personal god, whose merit is determined by the individual’s good fortune or lack thereof. Along the lines of this interpretation, one can explain Okonkwo’s tragic fate as the result of a problematic *chi*—a thought that occurs to Okonkwo at several points in the novel. Achebe shows that Igbo religious authorities, such as the Oracle, seem to possess uncanny insights. He approaches the matter of Igbo religion with a sense of wonder. The Igbo gods are mostly manifestations of nature and its elements, which makes sense because they are an agricultural society that depends on the regularity of seasons and natural phenomena to survive. They worship the goddess of the earth and are always careful to avoid committing sins against her for fear of vengeance that might wipe out an entire generation. (Shmoop Editorial Team 2013)

Such concept of personal gods is also found in the Soyinka’s *The Lion and The Jewel*. The orisha, or individual gods, may be conceived either as deified ancestors or as nature forces, and as minions or manifestations of the supreme being *Olodumare*, or as all of these, as need and convenience dictate. (Batra 2007)

In both of the novel and play, the researchers have found that most of the interactions occur to show respect to some external being—another man, an ancestral spirit, or a god. Respect and knowledge of one’s role in society is very important in determining such customs.

**Being African**

Soyinka also has an allegorical perspective in his play. His one of the major characters Sidi represents the Nigerian people, who are desirous to trust the ineffectiveness of the past, but eventually experience its power. The Bale represents the centuries of tradition that extend into the present. The mimes, which take place twice in the play, present flashbacks that give the play added historical depth. The play’s energetic combination of dance, song, mime, and comic dialogue reinforces its themes. Soyinka shows a passionate concern for his society, seeking freedom for all. His ideas are not only African, however: His characters and mannerisms are African, but his people represent the whole race. Although many characters are potential victims of their own ingenuity, his
heroes are marked ultimately by their ceaseless striving. (Online document 2016) And thus Soyinka shows his attitude to be etymological about African culture and tradition. This matter is also depicted through the rejection of Lakunle’s interest for the western culture and style by other natives.

Similarly, Achebe also upholds his tradition and culture. One of the most notable Igbo traditions is found in the rite of passage for young girls and boys maturing into adulthood. This sacrament of passage is not a sudden acceptance into adulthood but rather a series of rites they must go through over time before they become a true adult. Only eight days after birth, a child goes through the rite of circumcision. Every boy and girl must be circumcised in order to be part of the Igbo culture. Boys and girls must also complete the sacrament of wearing stuffs. This necessitates going from wearing nothing to being completely covered in clothes, signifying social status as well as individual improvement or transformation. The next rite of passage is Iru-mgede that means ‘fattening a girl before marriage’. This practice is believed to support enthusiastic children as well as a hearty marriage. Itu Anya is the fourth ritual of passage, durable for eight days, where one becomes a Heavenlier. Throughout this period, the kid thinks, reflects and even communicates with spirits so as to gain the power, knowledge, and audacity that is compulsory to turn out to be a Heavenlier. The last rite of passage for a child in Igbo culture is Igba-Mgba or wrestling. In this bustle, one shows his spot-on strength and courage and with success he becomes a real warrior and in turn, a man. (Khan 2014)

**Conclusion**

This study is an attempt to demonstrate the clash between the African black culture represented by the Igbo tribe and the white one enforced by the British expansionism. The majesty of Achebe and Soyinka existed in the vivid description of place, conventions and the people. They were able to show the inner conflict that took place inside the key characters in their quest of mere presence within the declining cultures in the face of a tyrannical white one. In both Things Fall Apart and The Lion and The Jewel, the writers have showed their post-colonial attitude to uphold their own societal culture and tradition in a formal way. The existential defiance is found in both of their works. The play The Lion and The Jewel has an allegorical level where Sidi represents the Nigerian people, who are enticed to have faith in the impotence of the past, but ultimately experience its supremacy. The Bale denotes the centuries of convention that outspread into the contemporary. Similarly in the Things Fall Apart also, we find Achebe’s strong appeal to depict the existentialistic panorama through the major character Okonkwo. Therefore, it can be said that both Achebe and Soyinka have shown a passionate concern for their society, seeking freedom for all. Their ideas are not only African, nevertheless; their characters and mannerisms are also African, and their people represent the whole race. Although many characters are potential victims of their own ingenuity, their heroes are marked ultimately by their ceaseless striving.

**References**

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