

# Cultural nativism in chinua achebe's things fall apart essay

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As the first novel written in standard Nigerian English, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe explores in totality literary nativism in African literature. Nativism as a philosophy assumes that the mind needs no sources external to its culture in the production of ideas. As such, cultural nativism as portrayed by Achebe, speaks volumes of the quest and affirmation for the autochthonous self against pressing outside forces. Written as a response to the pre-conceived idea of the colonialist that their culture is 'superior' that Africans lack the capacity to rule themselves, Achebe says of the colonialists: You construct a very elaborate excuse for your action. You say, for instance, that the man in question is worthless And quite unfit to manage himself or his affairs...if the worse the comes to the worst, you may even be prepared to question whether such as he can be, like you, fully human. Celebration'<sup>4</sup> European writers such as Joseph Conrad and Joyce Cary whose literary works gives flesh to this notion represented Africans in a light that lacks that does not depict the true state of things. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) were part of the direct inspiration that spurred Achebe on the need to put in proper perspective the African culture and define her true identity in the face of change brought by the colonialist.

The writer establishes in the novel that prior to the invasion of Western culture, Africa possess a thriving political, social and religious structures which proves without ambiguity that the people can indeed think for themselves and are in no wise 'inferior' to the Europeans. With the rich use of storytelling, myths, legends and folktales, Achebe expresses the reality that Africans are indeed creative in their intellectual framework. In addition,

the Ogwugwu cult which serves as a judiciary to settle disputes according to laid down customs, gives more credence to this reality.

Through this, the writer maintains the fact that the Umuofia people of Eastern Nigeria, setting of the novel, have an identity and culture that holds its own just like any other in any part of the world. The very reason he wrote in English language so as to explain in detail and comprehensive form to the Europeans by transliterating the Igbo culture and world view in a way that the English language cannot adequately capture. Until the advent of colonialism, Achebe portrays the Umuofia culture as unobtrusively smooth and embraced by the people although with some shortcomings which the surging European culture exposed via its religion. For instance the killing of twins and the Osu caste system. Even with these perceived 'shortcomings', the people still basked in the process of their identity. Thus, through the character of Okonkwo, we see the zeal to uphold one's culture and defend it against the domineering Western culture which has succeeded in confusing the people by displacing the 'self' and embracing the 'other' leading to an identity crisis. Nwoye in particular was caught between defining his identity, just as many youth of today who are trapped between their culture and that of the West.

As a story about a culture on the verge of change, *Things Fall Apart* deals with how the prospect of change affects various characters. The tension 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 enough for him. To

some extent, Okonkwo's resistance of cultural change is due to his fear of losing societal status. His sense of self-worth is dependent upon the traditional standards by which society judges him. This system of evaluating the 'self' inspires many of the clan's outcasts, Okonkwo's son Nwoye and others to embrace Christianity.

It must be highlighted that throughout the novel, Achebe shows how dependent such traditions are upon storytelling and language and thus, how quickly the abandonment of the Igbo language for English could lead to the eradication of these traditions. This is because a language encapsulates the cultures and tradition of any group of people. It is on this basis that Okonkwo took it upon himself, having lost Nwoye and his respect in the society to the Western culture, to fight and regain cultural independence. A subtle tool in the hand of the writer to achieve cultural nativism. This is against the backdrop that the colonial masters succeeded in turning his people against each other so that "the centre can no longer hold".

Okonkwo hints "the greatest obstacle in Umuofia is that coward, Egonwanne... if they listen to him; I shall leave them and plan my own revenge"( pg 159) Although Okonkwo did not succeed in his quest, Achebe underscores an important point in the novel that a culture cannot be self-sustained until it accommodates another contemporary one. In other words the Umuofia culture must accept change uphold its own, yet exist alongside other cultures. In conclusion, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* unveils absolutely that the African culture is unique. The novel did not fail to explain African traditions as it relates to realism and modernism and indeed the use

of non-African languages (English language). This reveals that though nativism speaks in the name of culture, it is actually based on race, yet culture and race are hardly collapsible therefore no culture can claim dominance over another.