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# Irony and tragedy in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*

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*This paper focuses on representations of irony and tragedy in two staple novels by African writer Chinua Achebe. They are in fact his first two novels initially envisioned by the author as forming a single book. The main character of the second novel is in fact Okonkwo's grandson, the latter being the hero of the first novel. Both stories dwell upon the clash between European colonists and African natives. This analysis targets the ending of both novels where, I argue, there is a display of the ironic and of the tragic which characterize the two protagonists' destiny.*

Key-words: *irony, tragedy, colonialism, native, history.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on two staple novels by African writer Chinua Achebe – *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. The former, published in 1958, is the most widely read and taught African book all over the world and has achieved the status of archetypal modern African novel. For the majority of readers the most memorable part of the book is its vivid evocation of Igbo society at the time of the first major incursions of British colonialism into Igbo lands at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Achebe has made it clear that his principal purpose in the book was to provide African readers with a realistic depiction of their pre-colonial past, free of the distortions and stereotypes imposed upon that past in European accounts.

*Things Fall Apart* can be divided into three basic segments. The initial section, covering the first thirteen chapters, is largely concerned with providing the readers with a vivid picture of the traditional way of life enjoyed by the inhabitants of an Igbo village before the invasion of the British. Focusing on the village of Iguedo, one of the nine confederated villages collectively known as Umuofia, this section of the book provides an account of the daily social, economic, political, family and spiritual lives of the villagers. The second part of the book concerns the protagonist's exile, during which both the British colonial administration and Christian missionaries make significant progress in displacing the traditional way of

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life in Umuofia. In Chapter 20, the protagonist, Okonkwo, returns to Umuofia, beginning the third and final part of the novel, in which he helps to lead a futile and ill-fated attempt to resist this cultural destruction, leading to his death by suicide.

*No Longer at Ease*, published in 1960, was initially envisioned by the author as forming one final section of the former novel. In the end it developed into a separate novel which forms a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*. It is set during a period just prior to independence – that is, not one but two generations after the period treated in *Things Fall Apart*. Although it has not gained as large an audience as the first one it deserves acclaim as an influential, finely written and engaging work. The extraordinary effect of reading both should be noted. *No Longer at Ease* traces the long-term impact of British colonialism in West Africa, dramatizes social and economic dilemmas still facing modern Africa and has helped lay a vital part of the stylistic as well as thematic groundwork for important works of African literature that have followed.

Both novels are essentially concerned with traditional Igbo life as it clashed with colonial powers in the form of missionaries and colonial government. These writings are also programmatic novels of nationalist self-assertion that interrogate the Eurocentric assumptions of colonial writing on Africa.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the ending of both novels, where, I argue, there is a display of the ironic and of the tragic which characterize the two protagonists' destiny.

## 2. The ironic tragedy in the ending of *Things Fall Apart* – a European representation

The novel's ending views history from the perspective of the District Commissioner, an occasion for Achebe to use biting irony. For the first time Igbo culture is now presented not from the inside as vital and autonomous, but from the outside as an object of anthropological curiosity. As the final scene of the novel unfolds, the Igbos take the District Commissioner to the place where the suicide was committed:

> Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling, and they stopped dead. "Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him," said Obierika. "We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming." The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs. "Why can't you take him down yourselves?" he asked. "It is against our custom," said one of the men. "It is an abomination for a man to take his own life." (Achebe 1958: 178)

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It is to be noted in this episode the way in which the District Commissioner easily moves from the *"resolute administrator"* to the *"student of primitive customs"*

Thus, those who wrote historical and anthropological accounts of the Igbos were either representatives of the British government or their semi-official guests, and the colonial administration not only helped to enable such research by opening up various regions, but also relied upon it in determining local policy. In the case of Igboland, the earliest anthropological studies were written by P. Amaury Talbot, himself a District Commissioner, and G. T. Basden (as in Begam 1997: 396-411). The latter was a personal friend of Achebe's father-but this did not prevent them from expressing in their published writings typically European attitudes towards Africans. By way of illustration we might consider how the scene with the District Commissioner continues:

> "Take down the body," the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger, "and bring it and all these people to the court." "Yes, sah," the messenger said, saluting. The Commissioner went away, taking three or four of the soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learned a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. (Achebe 1958: 179)

With respect to this, Achebe says in his essay, *Colonialist Criticism*:

> To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: "I know my natives," a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand-understanding being a pre-condition for control and control constituting adequate proof of understanding. (Achebe 1975: 74)

Therefore, it is important for the colonizers not to know the natives but to be able to say *I know my natives.* The District Commissioner ultimately reaches not genuine understanding but the illusion of understanding that comes with the power to control:

> Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger. (Achebe 1958: 179)

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Viewing the mores of the Igbo society from a narrow perspective the District Commissioner demonstrates his inability to understand the human dimensions of Okonkwo's fate. He was a symbol of tribal disintegration and administrative oppression who considered Okonkwo's death as an opportunity to give a pointless lesson on European etiquette. The irony in the commissioner's final statement is extremely obvious. Not only does he plan to de-emphasize Igbo culture by writing only one paragraph about Okonkwo's death but also the other Umuofian people stood by and allowed that history to be diminished without putting up any resistance whatsoever. Only Okonkwo escapes the final irony of the situation because he decided to take his own life in defiance of a humiliating and horrendous death at the hands of colonialists. By ironically undermining the perspective of the District Commissioner, by exposing the latter's personal ignorance (not a *whole chapter* but a *reasonable paragraph*) and political interests (the *Pacification* of the Lower Niger) Achebe seeks to confront and finally to discredit the entire discourse of colonialism, those quasi-historical, quasi-anthropological writings that have treated Africa as nothing more than-again I quote Achebe - "a foil to Europe, a place of negations." (Achebe 1997: 112-125)

To put it differently, the final chapter is not only the ending of the novel but also an illustration of the writer's view on history and tragedy. Thus, it is important to remember what Achebe himself has argued in interviews and essays: that while the disappearance of traditional Igbo culture involved a profound loss, it also contained the possibility of substantial gain. When he was asked about returning to pre-colonial society, the kind of world Okonkwo inhabited before *things fell apart* Achebe said, "It's not really a question of going back. I think if one goes back, there's something wrong somewhere, or else a misunderstanding" (Ogbaa 1981: 14-42). In another interview, he pushed this position further, arguing that colonization was a multi-faceted phenomenon, which had produced benefits as well as burdens: "I am not one of those who would say that Africa has gained nothing at all during the colonial period, I mean this is ridiculous-we gained a lot" (Achebe 1989: 155). He has insisted that, despite his own ambivalence on the subject, modernization is a necessary and essential part of Africa's future: "The comprehensive goal of a developing nation like Nigeria is, of course, development, or its somewhat better variant, modernization. I don't see much argument about that." (Achebe 1989: 155) One can understand from this that Achebe's response to colonization is very complex.

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### 3. The ironic tragedy in the ending of *"No Longer at Ease"* – history repeated

Both *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease* tell the story of a representative of the Igbo people who has a definite position on a question of principle and is destroyed in the ensuing collision between African and European values. The fall of Oknokwo's machete is replaced by the fall of the judge's gavel, as we are transported from a heroic to a legalistic world, but the narrative outline remains essentially the same. Thus, we notice Okonwko's traditional tragedy transform itself into Obi's modern tragedy, as the heroic gives way to the ironic.

The point of intersection between the two novels is when Obi discusses the nature of tragedy with Mr. Green, his potential employer. They actually discuss the 1948 novel *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene[2]. It is one of the latter's most famous novels set in a British controlled part of West Africa during World War II. Obi calls it "The only sensible novel any European has written on West Africa and one of the best novels I have ever read" (Achebe 1994: 53) though he has reservations about the ending in which the protagonist, the police officer Scobie, commits suicide. As part of his discussion of the ending, Obi articulates his own theory of tragedy in which he rejects the traditional Aristotelian notion that tragedy consists of a clear-cut resolution of things such as suicide and a cathartic purging of emotions. According to him

> Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly for ever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W. H. Auden. The rest of the world is unaware of it. Like the man in "A Handful of Dust" who reads Dickens to Mr. Todd. There is no release for him. When the story ends he is still reading. There is no purging of the emotions for us because we are not there. (Achebe 1994: 53)

In order to illustrate his point Obi makes further references to an elderly Igbo man, a Christian convert whom Obi knew in Iguedo who had suffered a series of misfortunes: "He said life was like a bowl of wormwood which one sips a little at a time world without end. He understood the nature of tragedy," (Achebe 1994: 96) This concept of tragedy ironically applies to the fate of Obi himself as opposed to the traditional tragedy of his grandfather whose life ends in suicide. And, again ironically, it is at least partly on the merit of his literary and philosophical analysis

[2] Henry Graham Greene was an English novelist, short story writer, playwright, screenwriter, travel writer and critic whose works explore the ambivalent moral and political issues of the modern world. Greene combined serious literary acclaim with wide popularity.

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during the interview, that Obi earns the position of secretary to the Scholarship Board, one that will ultimately lead to his corruption and decline.

Obi also offers a narrative analysis of his own past. In describing a tragedy that ends in suicide he describes his grandfather's tragic fall and its significance for Igbo culture after it was lost and *things fell apart*. Significant in this respect is the scene at the Okonkwo family during Obi's first visit to Iguedo after his return from England. There, a village elder and non-Christian, Odogwu, presides at the Okonkwo family home over the kola nut ceremony in a way that will not offend Isaac or any of the other Christians. Odogwu has a benign attitude toward Christianity, and his first good-natured remarks concerning the faith recall those of Akunna[3] in his discussions with Mr. Brown in *Things Fall Apart*. But in a little while Odogwu pays tribute to Okonkwo - definitely a delicate topic for Isaac, who, as mentioned in an early scene, "rejected everything about his father except…one proverb". As I have said one of the questions that *Things Fall Apart* asks is whether Okonkwo died heroically or shamefully, but at Isaac's house Odogwu leaves no doubt where he, and probably the other people in the village, stands on the issue. In praising Obi, he shapes the historical record in a way that gives mythical dimensions to Okonkwo's resistance to the British incursion in Umuofia:

> Obi is the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo who faced the white man single-handed and died in the fight. Stand up!' Obi stood up obediently. 'Remark him,' said Odogwu. 'He is Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo kpom-kwem, exact, perfect. (Achebe 1994: 61-62)

Odogwu goes on to mention and praise other renowned, non-Christians of the Iguedo of previous generations, and the entire speech indirectly honors traditional culture. Such praise in Isaac's Christian home for the father and way of life he rejected so long before is sharply ironic. Therefore one might understand that the boundaries between the heroic and the ironic are not clearly delineated, that the past and the present are always interlinked, that history is always written from two perspectives: of the dead and of the living.

## 4. Conclusions

Achebe used the first novel to prove that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans, that the societies were not mindless but that they had

[3] A character in Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart,* famous for his reluctance to give up traditional Igbo religion.

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a philosophy of their own, one of great depth and beauty, that they had dignity. Igbo culture is presented from the outside and its collapse is not viewed as an African tragedy but as a European triumph. Achebe uses biting irony in rendering the narrow perspective of the District commissioner, his inability to grasp the genuine dimensions of Okonkwo's destiny, his ignorance and political interests. Once more the colonialist discourse is discredited.

In the second novel, a modern, ironic tragedy applies to the hero's fate. It is the same kind of tragedy that he so passionately admires. My conclusion is that *No Longer at Ease* indicates that Okonkwo's tragedy has not reached its end and that the tragic destiny it implies continues to be lived by the next generations.

Both novels are written at a time when the crisis of colonialism presented post-colonial writers with a productive cultural space and by means of exploiting this crisis he began to chart alternative narratives of the histories and experiences of Africans. For him the ideological mission of African writing is to retrieve the value and dignity of a past insulted by European representation, and to counter the eternal truths and universalities of Western thought.

For formerly colonized cultures, post-colonial now, traumatized by colonialism, a fiction that recuperates Africa's autonomous resources and reconstitutes the fragmented colonial subjects makes an active contribution to the collective aspiration of regaining a sense of direction and identity. Achebe's remembrance does not encourage an unrecoverable past, but merely aims at challenging the colonial representation. He wants to reinvent national identity as a self-willed return to pre-colonial usable pasts and literary traditions. He advocates a conscious rejection of an imposed European identity and presents a realist representation of African existence, thinking, perceptions and values as well as a story of social havoc and psychic damage inflicted by the white invasion.

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