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Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God



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Individualism and Nonattainment of Social Change in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

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Abstract:

Purpose: In a society where many believe that only the mailed fist can maintain discipline, a refreshingly different point of view is reached by the comparison of two of Chinua Achebe's novels: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. The purpose of this paper is to explore the viewpoint presented in these novels by comparing their two heroes – Okonkwo and Ezeulu. They are compared first as revolutionary characters and second as revolutionary leaders, using as a guide Calvert's (1996) claims that individual leaders are not necessarily revolutionary leaders. Okonkwo and Ezeulu are seen to be both leaders and revolutionaries; they fail however, as revolutionary leaders for the simple but unarguable reason that they have no supporters.

Methodology: Methodological procedures are adopted which include description of the study's sampling and method of data analysis. The study adopts a simple survey design.

Findings: The paper in its findings discovers that individualism cannot thrive in a revolution of a society rather it is collective effort that appears to be more effective in a revolutionary struggle such as found in Umuofia and Umuaro respectively. The paper concludes that followership marks an authentic revolutionary leader as the non-support of Okonkwo and Ezeulu in the novels leads to their tragic end.

Unique contribution to theory, policy and practice: The paper recommends communalism as a way out of African socio-political barriers and posits that individuality cannot bring the social change and total liberation in African continent.

Keywords: *Individualism, Nonattainment, Social Change, Eco-criticism, phenomenism*

Introduction

From distant time, changes have always been achieved through the communal or collective efforts. The group is at the core of social change. From the biblical account of the revolution in heaven, a group was involved. Lucifer and his supporters (Angels) spearheaded the revolution that changed the status-quo in heavenly places. The sociologist, Peter Calvert, makes the following claims: “unless individual leaders, whatever their psychological drives, call up some kind of response in a body of supporters, they cannot become revolutionary leaders or indeed political leaders of any kind” (Calvert 1996, p.58). The “individual leader”, in broad terms, is the individual who wields some authority in the group, is of relatively high status and is a candidate for overall leadership. Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* are both individual leaders, being leaders in their respective communities: Umuofia and Umuaro, and they validate Calvert’s claim that an individual leader can never become a revolutionary leader without supporters.

The Methodology

This paper examines the communal culture in African society and how it affects the individual. It presents the powers of the individual to bring about the planned and desired social change which ultimately failed. The paper is anchored on the theories of eco-criticism of William Rueckert and phenomenalism as propounded by George Berkeley to demonstrate the power of the individual in changing the status-quo and to bring social change in the society. It focuses on the culture of the community which is practised on Africa and how trapped the Africans are from making headways in development. Within the tenet of eco-critical theory of literature coined by William Rueckert in his critical writing “Literature and Ecology: an experiment in eco-criticism” (1978), this study draws from the pastoral arm of eco-criticism in examining some of the root causes and the effects of environmental mismanagement, degradation and pollution which results in the revolution in the novels. The work uses qualitative methodology as its research tool. The qualitative research methodology helps to give an in-depth understanding of the eco-critical imagery in the Igbo region as portrayed in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* the phenomenon the study hinges on. The study uses qualitative method of analysis which allows for critical flexibility of data. Other methods such as summarising, analysing and critiquing are also used in this study.

Research Design

The work adopted the simple survey design. This method is applicable to all findings garnered in the cause of this research from existing works and acted groups of people to explain tools for data collection. Data were collected through insightful critical works in the two novels, oral interviews using tape recorders, phones and other digital devices.

Sample and Sampling Design

Five critical works on the two novels were selected and analysed. The primary data collection is *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Other secondary sources of data collection include oral

interview sessions, journal published articles and books on related topics obtain on verifiable sources. Six literary experts were interviewed to ascertain individualism and nonattainment of social change of Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart*.

Writing on Okonkwo, for instance Ojinmah (1991) notes his aggressive tendency – which is normally a virtue in leadership – but not his revolutionary potential; he accuses him of “abuse of power” which is manifested in his “tendency to overreach himself”[and] his inability to control himself (p.22). The same is akin to Ezeulu’s character as Nwodo (2004) notes that: “One of the pervading ethical notions in the novel is the idea of responsibility. The novel opens with Ezeulu’s consciousness of the gravity of his duty as the chief priest of Ulu, and of his responsibility to his clan Umuaro. It ends with the consequences of his failed responsibility to his clan” (p.27). Okonkwo and Ezeulu, the strongmen, would change their world by main force. The two of them are seen to be rebels by the white men and none succeeds as a rebel leader.

Okonkwo and Ezeulu are obsessed with the desire to revolutionise the outlook of their clans: Umuofia and Umuaro; their “philosophy of acceptance” as termed by (Soyinka 1988, p.12).

The Igbo Community in the Novels

In these novels we find ideas about the Igbo society, about the people’s religion, their philosophy especially their ethics and their ontology the Igbo society is religious and ethical but more fundamentally ontological. Outwardly, religion rules and dominates every aspect of their lives. Little wonder the communities of Umuofia never spared Enock when he unmasked an Ekwugwu masquerade in *Things Fall Apart* and Oduche for locking up the royal python in a box in *Arrow of God*. The stanch refusal of Okonkwo and Ezeulu to submit to the Whiteman’s rule is typical of their revolutionary temperament. It appears to the Whiteman and other fellow tribesmen as irrationality, notably when dealing with an enemy as formidable as colonialism. But Okonkwo and Ezeulu cannot see things their way for the simple reason that they see things in black and white. As far as Okonkwo and Ezeulu are concerned, the tribal culture is being represented, the people are conceding as usual, and their societies are in disarray. The philosophy of acceptance is killing their communities; it must be jettisoned immediately and a new principle: “stubborn and violent resistance” must take its place.

Of particular importance is the virtue of justice that is demanded of them also by their gods. Justice thus plays adorable role, in religion and in ethics. In the Igbo community, nature is sacred. Men must approach it with reverence and purity. There is need for purification before the planting season.

Any misuse of nature or of natural relationships is not only wrong in the sense of improper, that is, contrary to the natural order of things; it is also an offence against the gods and injuries to the man. All these laws and order are tempered by Whiteman and his religion; hence Okonkwo and Ezeulu rise to the occasion in defence and protection but without the support of their people.

Achebe is known for his delightful exploration collective power against individuality. He was not blind to the dialectics that pitch the individual to a sad end in its struggle of assertion and deepest yearning for a new social order.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Okonkwo and Ezeulu are imbued with all traits of individualism which ultimately failed them at the end of the stories in these novels. They rise and fall as they try to carve out niches for themselves; their impetus for individuality fail them completely. They prove themselves unworthy of eminence to lead their people in Umuofia and Umuaro. Their moves against the Whiteman in a battle of vengeance against their murdered communities and is a recognition of their worthlessness even in the mind's eye for their people.

For Ezeulu, it is expedient that as a chief priest of Ulu deity, he should go ahead and confront danger before it reached his people. That is the responsibility of his priesthood in accordance with community's traditional demand. At the early stage of Umuaro's contemplation of war against Okperi over a disputed piece of land, Ezeulu had argued against it. As an individual, his opinion does not hold sway, as he tells them that Ulu as the protector of the clan "would not fight an unjust war" (p.15)

Even in telling the truth, his opponent Ogbuefi Nwaka makes his point, making the issue of the land debate a relative matter. "Wisdom", he said, "is like a goatskin bag, every man carries his own. Knowledge of the land is also like that. Ezeulu has told us what his father told him about olden days.... But we know that the lore of the land is beyond the knowledge of many fathers" (Achebe 1964, p.16). On the issue "to call the new yam feast", the elders of community meet to persuade him "to call the new yam feast" before any calamity befalls the community. "We cannot wait for that to happen", said one of the delegates, "an adult does not sit and watch the she-goat suffers the pain of childbirth tied to a post" (Achebe 1958, p.206).

Ironically, Ezeulu himself also fails to measure up to the expectation of the clan in a situation of utmost gravity. And as his friend Ogbuefi Akuehue told him earlier:"... But you forgot one thing: that no man however great can win judgement against a clan" (Achebe 1964, p.131). This to an extent summarises the issue of individualism and nonattainment of social change.

On the other hand, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo's life has been a ceaseless struggle for status, and in the eyes of his people, he brings about his own downfall by challenging too powerful an adversary – *chi* – his personal god or guardian spirit. Okonkwo is crushed because he tries to wrestle with his *chi*. Many critics such as Nwodo (2004), Nnolim (2006) and Emenyonu (2006) have rightly interpreted the killing of Ikemefuna, the killing of the court messenger, and the breaking of the sacred weak of peace by Okonkwo as individual actions and acts of affront to his *chi*. His failure is the result of his individual decision, not collective.

Okonkwo is prone to inarticulacy, which is a metaphorical expression of his struggle to "reach" his hearers. He had a slight stammer, and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists. Okonkwo ultimately fights himself into a corner. Looked

at from the outside, it would appear that the clan is oppressive of the individual that the individual loses his individuality in the overwhelming dominance of the community. Okonkwo loses his individuality as well. In the assembly Umuofia elders *Ndichie* where decisions are taken only “at the end”, “after everybody has spoken”, here again Okonkwo failed to appreciate the significance and the importance of some of these ontological principles. And so was his suicide, a unilateral decision.

When Okonkwo appeared for the first time Umuofia was united. The community spoke with one voice. This was manifested in the vigorous manner *Umuofia Kwenu* was intoned, as well as the involvement and commitment with which everybody responded. In the words of Obierika; “we were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers; and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart” (Achebe 1958, Pp.124-125) Indeed, it was a collective thing, life then had meaning for Okonkwo who felt he had a clear and correct perception excellence as he understood it lay in the fact that its men were people of substance who were strong and courageous. The people co-existed o communalism and not individualism. Had Okonkwo pursued his revolutions against the Whiteman in a collective manner, he would have recorded success and attained a social change in Umuofia. According to one of the oldest members of the Umunna: “we come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so. ... You do not know what it is to speak with one voice” (Achebe 1958, p.118).

The ideal thing would have been to confront the white leadership collectively, devising solutions to the problems and the challenges confronting the community. Achebe was the character of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* to denounce individualism and promote collectivism.

INDIVIDUALISM AND NONATTAINMENT OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN *THINGS FALL APART* AND *ARROW OF GOD*

It is pertinent to state the obvious that individualism did not provide the desired change in the Igbo community of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* because of individual interests. In the event of a clash of interests between the individual and the community, the individual always submits to the will of the community (clan). This could be taken as one possible explanation of the subsequent downfall of Ezeulu, the chief priest of Ulu deity of Umuaro; that his downfall could be due to the fact that he failed in his individual responsibility to the clan. This sounds plausible. “Tomorrow is Afo”, said Edo, “and we have come to find out what work you have for us”. Ezeulu thought for a while as though he was unprepared for the proposal” (Achebe 1964, p13).

Similarly, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* failed in his individual responsibility. His move against the white man’s messenger is act of an individual that did not see the light at the end of the day, and his eventual suicide culminates such. He commits suicide even when he perceives that the people of Umuofia would not go to war but would rather swallow their insults and capitulate

collectively. “Then they came to the tree which Okonkwo’s body was dangling and they stop dead. Perhaps your men can help us bring him down and bury him” (Achebe 1958, Pp.146-147).

His death is a representation of the power of individualism in an attempt to bring about social change which failed woefully. With his death, the Whiteman triumphed their instituted value system remained. At his colossal failure as an individual, *Obrierika*, his best friend is geared and inflamed to respond to the Whiteman as follows: “That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself and now he will be buried like a dog” (Achebe 1958, p.78). Though ironic that Umuofia’s greatest son would be buried like a dog, the message and its impact stays with the community to re-orientate itself to reflect on their value system, that individuality fails but communalism thrives in a collective bargain. The tragedy of Umuofia in *Thing Fall Apart* results from a shift from communalism to individualism. Okonkwo’s individuality ended badly like most individual assertions, its ripple effects go beyond the surface and did not bring about a new social order in Umuofia.

Okonkwo ends up as a tragic hero. It is for this lack of belief in the efforts of the individuals that prompted Ogbujah (2006) to posit that: “African art... is therefore not an individual affair but a creative communal enterprise in which the community functions both as the beneficiary and the active partakers of the experience” (p.38). To him, Okonkwo should have waited for the collective actions of the people instead of acting alone. But in a different dimension, Ogbonnaya (2021) condemns Okonkwo’s individual actions and describes it as “stubbornness” (p.56). She further describes Okonkwo as “The little bird “Nza”... he has become the challenged, not the one that challenges, the hunted” (p.56). In her view, Okonkwo failed totally as an individual for rejecting collectivism.

Okonkwo must “maintain security” within the group. Such niceties and maintenance of security and decorum is the reason for doldrums that have engulfed Africa. Therefore, freedom, uniqueness and ascension to a higher level are among the gains of collectivism. To be lost in the nest of individuality is to lose all the changes and new social order that whirlpool of community bring about. (p.56)

Things Fall Apart and *Arrow of God* portray an imaginary world that bears this comment out. It is evident that inhabitants of Umuofia and Umuaro are no different from other human beings, fictional or otherwise, in that they are more obliging when they are handled discreetly. Umuofia’s vote of no confidence on Okonkwo in *Thing Fall Apart* and Umuaro’s vote of no confidence on Ezeulu in *Arrow of God* are apt condemnation of individualism, an index of its misgivings; they will not trust them with their future, despite the fact that they are renowned chiefs and bonafide revolutionaries.

Conclusion

The communal existence and culture are the anchor of African new social order the culture of group thinking, communal togetherness and conformity is inherent in African communities and

fosters developmental strides the community would have been enjoying. In other communities in the globe where growth and development take place astronomically, it is the culture of collectivism that makes it strive as individualism is the bane of social development. Therefore, the conflict of the group with the individual is essential as evidenced in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* between the community of Umuofia and Okonkwo and Umuaro and Ezeulu respectively. With such conflicts, the group will triumph over the individual status-quo is challenged and new social order emerges. We conclude that as far as revolutionary leadership based on individualism is concerned, it is bound to fail as experienced in these novels.

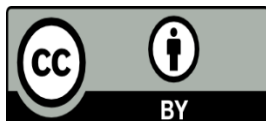
Recommendations

The information and data this study generates provide a reliable source of information for further studies on the subject, since every datum that formed the fabric of this research was gathered from field works and authentic documents extracted from proven sources like research libraries and real time oral interviews. It will further advance the eco-criticism that it encourages the teamwork on a revolutionary struggle in any environment that is mismanaged, polluted and marginalised because eco-criticism is the application of ecological principles and phenomenon to explore all forms of environmental mismanagement as evidenced in the novels under review in this study.

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