Colonialism as a Redeeming Evil in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

Colonialism is commonly perceived and portrayed negatively in any discourses and even considered as an evil. This perception is generally connected with the harsh, severe and brutal exploitation of the people and land being colonized. It is related to its historical and cultural denigration, oppression, suppression, economic exploitation and deprivation, literary prejudice and linguistic interference on the side of the colonized. However, apart from the negative impacts due to the colonialism, there is no doubt at all that it has brought some certain positive impacts for the colonized. Colonizers have civilized huge numbers of people by spreading enlightenment, knowledge, information, technology, and even a love of learning all over the globe. It is while governing the indigenous people that they civilize them. This study aims at critically studying on the colonialism as a redeeming evil in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. It highlights the enlightenment, progress and divergent developments brought by colonialism to the Nigerian Igbo. The research result shows that colonialism has brought some positive impacts and undeniable landmark achievements to the Igbo in terms of establishment of religion, building of churches, schools, hospitals, courts, government, trade and commerce, the acceptance of outcasts, the stoppage of the killing of twins, that have made it a necessary redeeming evil, and even a blessing in disguise. It also reveals that Chinua Achebe actually acknowledges that colonialism has brought positive impacts to the Nigerian Igbo. The method used in this research is descriptive research proposed by Kothari (2004).

Keywords: colonialism, redeeming evil, Igbo, outcast, ogbanje, osu.

Introduction

In the 1700s, the British Empire and other European powers had settlements and forts in West Africa but had not yet established the full-scale plantation colonies which existed in Americas. British influence in the Niger area increased gradually over the 19th century, but Britain did not effectively occupy the area until 1885. Other European powers acknowledged Britain’s power over the area in the 1885 Berlin Conference. The colonial period proper in Nigeria lasted from 1900 to 1960, after which Nigeria gained its independence (Wikipedia).

Colonizer, a powerful and rich country, usually takes over the political, that nation as a subordinate nation. Boehmer (2005, p. 2) states that colonialism is the settlement of territory, the exploitation or development of resources, and the
attempt to govern the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, often by force. Daniel (1980) states that the phenomena associated with colonialism include monopolistic, seizure of territory, enslavement of the indigenous population, racism and militarism.

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) is a Nigerian novelist poet, short-story writer, critical thinker and essayist, and one of the leading intellectual figures in the contemporary pan-African region, as well as in the world of English literature. He is also considered as the man who invented African literature and the most widely read of contemporary African writers. In his first novel, Things Fall Apart, first published in 1958, he reflects authentic presentation of the Igbo society in Nigeria before and after the coming of Great Britain to colonize Nigeria. He evidently depicts the issues of various social, political, economic, religious, psychological and personal issues of the Nigerian Igbo. This research is an attempt to reveal the redeeming impacts of Great Britain’s colonialism to the Nigerian Igbo in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart.

**Literature Review**

Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart depicts the impacts of Great Britain's colonialism to the Igbo people from the perspective of an observer as well as a critic. He has tried his best to maintain his objective and honest stance in the novel. He avoids giving the Igbo any unnecessary sympathy, painting some of their irrational beliefs and follies, such as human sacrifice, the abandonment of infant twins and the bodies inflicted with some strange illness to Evil Forest, mutilation of the ogbanje, etc. He as an original Igbo vividly presents the richness and potentialities of the Igbo society, but at the same time he is not uncritical of the limitations of his society where he belongs to. Kenalemang (2013, p. 16) states that Achebe is successful in making readers aware that although the effect of European colonialism challenges the culture of Igbo, the benefits of it can also be seen. Igbo society stands to benefit from the school and from other smaller things such as bicycles that the white men come with. In line with Kenalemang's statement, Gikandi (1991) states that unlike many other African writers of his generation, Achebe did not see colonial rule as something that could be transcended simply by an appeal to a heroic and romantic African past, while other writers had seen the culture of colonialism as the antithesis of an African identity. In his Morning Yet on Creation Day, he states:

> But the bounties of the Christian God (personified in colonial missionary or evangelism) were not to be taken lightly—education, paid jobs, and many other advantages that nobody in his right senses could underrate. And in fairness we should add that there was more than naked opportunism in the defection of many to the new religion (Christianity). For in some ways and in certain circumstances it stood firmly on the side of humane behavior. It said, for instance, that twins were not evil and must no longer be abandoned in the forest to die. Think what that would have done for that unhappy woman whose heart torn to shreds at every birth could now hold on precariously to a new hope. (Achebe, 1982, p. 65)

**Research Method**

Regarding the research method, having a focus on content analysis, qualitative research is used in performing this research. Sahu (2013, p. 4) says that in qualitative approach, research is mainly concerned with subjective assessment of the respondent. It is mainly concerned with attitudes, opinions, behaviors, impressions, etc. Thus, qualitative research is an approach to research to generate insights of the subject concerned in non-quantitative form or not subjected to rigorous quantitative analytical tools. Besides, this research uses descriptive method proposed by Kothari (2004) since it describes a state or an event that already exists,
and is depicted in the novel. The purpose of this research is to reveal the redeeming evil of colonialism to Igbo people in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, who audaciously acknowledges that colonialism has brought positive impacts in terms of enlightenment, progress and divergent developments to the Nigerian Igbo so that the truth that colonialism contributes to the developments of the lower Niger is indisputable.

**Result and Discussion**

Chinua Achebe, one of the most original literary artists writing in English, is well known all over the world for having played a germinal role in the founding and developing of African literature. A critical and objective analysis on his *Things Fall Apart* reveals that he, in spite of severe criticisms of the colonialism in Africa, unpretentiously acknowledges its positive contributions to African Igbo people. He sincerely acknowledges the positive impacts of colonialism, especially to human behavior, education, health, and economic development of Nigerian.

The destruction and crumbling down of Igbo life is not totally due to the intervention of colonizers through their religion and government. Many Igbo willingly join the religion brought by the colonizers as they find that some certain customs prevailing in their society are irrational evils. Some Igbo question about the evil practices in their society, like throwing of twins as the decree of the earth goddess. The earth goddess has decreed that twins:

- were an offence on the land and must be destroyed. And if the clan did not exact punishment for an offense against the great goddess, her wrath was loosed on all the land and not just on the offender. (Achebe, 2000, p. 88)

The excerpt shows that twins are considered an offence on the land so that Igbo people kill twins out of a greater fear of earth goddess’s wrath. Whenever twins were born, their parents have to leave them at the “Evil Forest” to die.

Nwoye and Obierika, two Igbo people, thought of the twins who were thrown just after they were born. They wonder what sin these newly born children have committed that they have to be mercilessly thrown away in the forest to die. It is seen when Nwoye along with his friends return home from a distant farm across the stream, he hears an infant crying in the forest.

... they heard the voice of an infant crying in the thick forest... Nwoye had heard that twins were put in earthenware pots and thrown away in the forest, but he had never yet come across them. (Achebe, 2000, p. 43)

Obierika is also led into greater complexities about the evil practice prevailing in his society, but he finds no answer to it. He was struck with mourn as “he remembered his wife’s twin children, whom he had thrown away.” He asked, “What crime had they committed?” (Achebe, 2000, p. 88)

Throwing new born twins to the forest to die is really an inhuman practice since twins are known to originate from the same zygote and form into two embryos, and not as a bad omen sent by the gods and as supernatural beings that could bring devastation upon society as the Igbo people believed.

Igbo people are also quite superstitious by believing that *ogbanje*, one of the wicked children who, when they died, would enter their mothers’ wombs to be born again. They believe that *Ogbanje* is an evil spirit that would deliberately plague a
family with misfortune. Whenever, a new born child considered as an *Ogbanje* died, it will be mutilated.

The medicine man then ordered that there should be no mourning for the dead child. He brought out a sharp razor from the goatskin bag slung from his left shoulder and began to mutilate the child. Then he took it away to bury in the Evil Forest, holding it by the ankle and dragging it on the ground behind him. (Achebe, 2000, p. 55)

The practice of abandonment of twins at birth and the mutilation of infant corpses thought to be *ogbanje* is really inhumane and cruel. It is the religion brought by the colonizers, which welcome the mothers of the twins, and save the life of the twins. The missionaries rescue twins from the forest. The missionaries’ humane care to the twins spreads out that women who used to give birth to twins come to join the new religion. It is hard to imagine the heart breaking of the mothers whose new born twins are snatched away from their arms and thrown away to the forest.

One pregnant Igbo woman by the name of Nneka who has had borne twins in her four previous pregnancies soon joins Cristians since she knows it would be safe to be with the Christians if she gives birth to twins again.

“Nneka had had four previous pregnancies and child-births. But each time she had borne twins, and they had been immediately thrown away. Her husband and his family were already becoming highly critical of such a woman and were not unduly perturbed when they found she had fled to join the Christians.” (Achebe, 2000, p. 107)

Okonkwo’s oldest son, Nwoye, also converts into Christianity, and the main reason behind his joining Christianity is that he cannot find a reasonable answer why twins has to be abandoned in the forest, and why human beings like Ikemefuna has to be sacrificed. Ikemefuna, the ill-fated boy from Mbaino given to Umuofia as compensation to avoid war, is killed by his father as “the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves had pronounced”. It is also the Oracle that has told the people of Abame to kill the white men who come to their village. The Oracle told them that:

the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them. ... And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man’s friends. (Achebe, 2000, p. 97).

Achebe, through the words of a native named Uchendu, acknowledges the irrational thought; “Never kill a man who says nothing. Those men of people of Abame were fools.” (Achebe, 2000, p. 98)

Igbo people also believe that “an ‘evil forest’ was alive with sinister forces and powers of darkness,” (Achebe, 2000, p. 105). They believe that the missionaries who have settled in the evil forest will die within four days. In fact after the fourth day, none of them dies. It is also one of the reasons that the missionaries soon win their converts. The Igbo people’s failure of the Evil Forest to harm the missionaries for constructing a church in its area has added clarity to their false beliefs.

Another reason why Cristianity soon win converts is that it does not recognize caste discrimination as it is practiced by the Igbo people to *Osu*, the outcasts (a taboo for ever, poor, helpless and unfortunate people sacrificed to gods and goddesses for protection). *Osu* do not find a place in Umuofian society; they lived in isolation from
the people; they were like untouchables. In Christianity these Osu are equally treated and given the opportunity to live among the normal human beings.

These outcasts, or osu, seeing that the new religion welcomed twins and such abominations, thought that it was possible that they would also be received. And so one Sunday two of them went into the church. There was an immediate stir; but so great was the work the new religion had done among the converts that they did not immediately leave the church when the outcasts came in. (Achebe, 2000, p. 111)

It is evident that colonialism with the religion they have brought has restored morals, humanity, freedom and dignity to the outcasts that they willingly convert into Christianity. The two outcasts were received, and their acceptance into the church gave a great momentum to other outcasts to convert into Christianity. Soon after, nearly all the osu followed their example.

Igbo people also have a superstitious practice to a man who died in the Week of Peace, a week before the planting season which is observed by Igbo people to respect the earth goddess. It is an abomination for a man to die during the Week of Peace that the dead body will not be buried, but cast into the evil forest.

‘... in some clans it is an abomination for a man to die during the Week of Peace.’
‘It is indeed true,’ said Ogbuefi Ezeudu. ‘They have that custom in Obodoani. If a man dies at this time, he is not buried but cast into the Evil Forest. It is a bad custom which these people observe because they lack understanding.’ (Achebe, 2000, p. 23)

Chinua Achebe through the words of Ogbuefi Ezeudu admits that the practice of not burying a man who died in the Week of Peace, and throwing it to the evil forest is a bad custom. He also sincerely acknowledges that the indigenous people, who observed the bad custom, lack understanding.

Besides, when a man is afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs, he is not allowed to die in the house. He will be carried to the evil forest to die and rot away there. Igbo people believe that such sickness is an abomination to the earth goddess; therefore, the victim cannot have a proper burial. One native by the name of Unoka died of the swelling so that he is not allowed to get a proper burial.

He died of the swelling which was an abomination to the earth goddess. When a man was afflicted with swelling in the stomach and the limbs, he was not allowed to die in the house. He was carried to the Evil Forest and left there to die. There was the story of a very stubborn man who staggered back to his house and had to be carried again to the forest and tied to a tree. The sickness was an abomination to the earth, and so the victim could not be buried in her bowels. He died and rotted away above the earth, and was not given the first or the second burial. Such was Unoka’s fate. (Achebe, 2000, p. 13)

Such a practice is really inhumane. It cannot be imagined that a breathing man is tied to a tree in the thick forest to die and rot away there without being given burial. In fact, the man actually suffers from the diseases, like leprosy or smallpox.

Committing suicide is also considered an abomination to the earth goddess. Okonkwo has killed one of the white men, and to avoid the disgrace of being punished in the white man’s law, he commits suicide. When his kinsmen find his
dead body dangling, they refuse to touch it, and instead ask the white men to take the dead body and bury it. On being asked the reason, one of them explains:

“It is against our custom. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the Earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it.” (Achebe, 2000, p. 147).

The excerpt shows that Okonkwo’s dead body cannot be touched by his own people. It is only strangers who can bury the dead body so that they asked the white men to bring him down and bury him. Such a custom is also irrational and inhumane.

It is fair and just that a man who kills somebody else must be punished in accordance to his crime. However, it is irrational and unjust when the punishment given is not only to the doer but also to all his family members; wives, children, belongings and also animals. Okonkwo has accidentally killed a clansman, and apart from being exiled for seven years, his houses are set on fire, property is destroyed and animals are killed.

As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound, dressed in garbs of war. They set fire to his houses, demolished his red walls, killed his animals and destroyed his barn. It was the justice of the earth goddess, and they were merely her messengers. (Achebe, 2000, p. 88)

Such kind of punishment really cannot be understood. Moreover, the killing is inadvertently done. The Igbo people claim that they are merely the messengers of the earth goddess and what they have done is the justice of the earth goddess.

Apart from establishment of religion, Mr. Brown, one of the missionaries, also helps the natives in further enlightenment and development through formal education and the building of hospitals. He builds schools to impart literacy on the natives and essentially to prepare them as effective leaders of their country. Schools are set up and the natives are given education that they gain new knowledge. Superstitious beliefs start giving way to rational belief, religion. Besides, hospitals are also established. The Igbo people begin to acknowledge that the medicine of the white man proves quick in working. The idea of the colonialism in building hospitals and schools is indeed dignified.

And so he built a school and a little hospital in Umuofia. He went from family to family begging people to send their children to his school... More people came to learn in his school, and he encouraged them with gifts of singlets and towels. They were not all young, these people who came to learn. Some of them were thirty years old or more. They worked on their farms in the morning and went to school in the afternoon. And it was not long before the people began to say that the white man’s medicine was quick in working. Mr. Brown's school produced quick results. A few months in it were enough to make one a court messenger or even a court clerk. Those who stayed longer became teachers; and from Umuofia laborers went forth into the Lord’s vineyard. New churches were established in the surrounding villages and a few schools with them. (Achebe, 2000, p. 128)

Apart from establishing the religion, building the schools and hospitals, the colonizers also bring a government and build a court that they have become an agent of change and development for the natives.
But apart from the church, the white man had also brought a government. They had built a court… The messengers guarded the prison, which was full of men who had offended against the white man’s law. Some of these prisoners had thrown away their twins and some had molested the Christians. (Achebe, 2000, p. 123)

The colonialists also introduce law and regulations to the indigenous people. Since the establishment of the white man law, the natives are no longer free to do their irrational practices. The natives who still throw away their twins or commit crimes against humanity will be brought before the law of the colonialists, and put behind the bars.

The colonialists also built a trading store in Umuofia. It makes trade possible for the natives that they get the real money through it. They can sell their excess crops, or the crops of the old year which used to being disposed after the new grains are harvested. Before the introduction of trading store, crops are seen only as seeds or food, but the trade center has opened the doors of wealth for them. The trading center entices the natives to learn business, and Achebe acknowledges the economic contributions of the colonialists.

The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia. (Achebe, 2000, p. 126)

It is seen that the developmental strides of the colonialism are not limited to the establishment of churches, schools, hospitals, government, prisons and courts; they have also initiated and boosted trade and commerce between the natives and the expatriate merchants. The excerpt shows that Achebe acknowledges the economic growth as well as development of Igbo people. They begin experiencing vast economic growth due to the great price of the palm oil and kernel which have become the white man’s demands. Not only does the indigenous people start being familiar with the real money other than cowries, but they also earn and use the real money for their daily needs as well as for their contentment. This significant favorable change constitutes one of the positive impacts of colonialism to the Igbo people.

Conclusion
Indisputably, colonialism has positive effects to the Igbo people and should not be overlooked. Chinua Achebe in Things Fall Apart acknowledges that Igbo people have imperfections in some certain aspects of their life. Despite a great number of crimes and sins against the indigenous people, colonialism play a significant role as an agent of social enlightenment and change, beacon of light and development, bringer of freedom for the oppressed, and hope for the desperate and the disillusioned in the society. This research reveals that colonialism has brought a number of positive impacts to the indigenous people, such as establishment of religion, building of churches, schools, hospitals, courts, government, trade and commerce, the acceptance of outcasts, the stoppage of the killing of twins, that make colonialism deserve to be called as a redeeming evil.

References


