A Postcolonial View Of Chinua Achebe's

This essay will apply some key concepts of Orientalism and Ambivalence in the novel 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe. The novel shows us how the Africans, who live in the area , suffer from the overwork and mistreatment of the colonizer. In addition , it examines the conflict existing between two different races which are The Nigerian and the white people who came to the village . it is a deep conflict between two concepts , tradition and new customs .which have been adapted slowly by the villagers. The setting of the novel is catchy because the hero 'Okonkwo' who lived in two periods , firstly the pre-European period and then the post-European imperial period . This essay will employ four key aspects from the two theories of Orientalism and Ambivalence ; Binary Opposition , hegemony, stereotype and mimicry .

Postcolonial literature is the theory which study and research the clash between two cultures, and one of them has ideology empires. They claim that they are more superior as compare to the other . They established the notion of stereotype upon the third world, and they regarded the third world as uncivilized, uneducated, and the colonizer is superior to the native community in all aspects. The colonial writers described the native people from the Western perspective and depicted them as savage, beyond understanding . Apart from that, the Colonial writers also exaggerated the depiction of native culture, traditional and customs. As Sawant S. B. the writers of Empire Writes Back use the term “postcolonial to cover all cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day.” (Sawant S. B. 2013). Postcolonial discourse emerges by many writers as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatrii Spivak, Frantz Fanon and others . It is the result of the work of these writers. It discovers through the ways of representation and modes of observation.

Nigeria is an African country that is located on the western coast of Africa which consist of 36 states. It was founded in 1914 after a long suffering caused by colonizers .Because of this , a cultural contact has emerged during that era . as a result, many African authors tended to write about that issue . Nowadays, there is hardly any novel written in Africa which does not discuss this contact. As a matter of fact, the act of writing novel in English language in Africa started as a reaction and protest against the colonizers for they have been abusing the poor Africans for long centuries . The novel with this background looks at the Nigerian state from its early beginnings to the present state of chaos and anarchy that drove Chinua Achebe to use his novel to reflect these historical movements. It shows clearly that imperialism is the basis of the crises and contradictions that have befallen the Nigerian state.

The novel follows the life of a Nigerian man, Okonkwo .He is one of the respected leaders of his village. He is also a wrestling champion. Both his wrestling and his leadership role are driven by his shame about his father. When a man from a neighboring village kills one of the women from Okonkwo's village, a peace settlement requires the son of the man who killed the woman to come live in Okonkwo's village. Unfortunately, a decision is made to kill the boy. One of the village elders, Ezeudu, warns Okonkwo not to assist with killing the boy. Determined not to seem like a coward, Okonkwo kills the boy himself . After the boy dies, Okonkwo accidentally kills Ezeudu's son. For his crime, the village determines he must spend seven years in exile. During his exile, white missionaries arrive in the village. When Okonkwo finally returns, the white men have thoroughly infiltrated his village. Okonkwo helps destroy a Christian church,

only to be arrested by the white government. He even kills one of the white men. After he does so, he realizes that the other villages have changed too much. They will not fight the white men off. Unable to live with his revelation, Okonkwo kills himself. This is a very important moment in the novel because, according to Okonkwo's traditional beliefs, suicide is not allowed. Okonkwo's desperation about his changing village is staggering if it can outweigh his strict adherence to the traditional ways.

Orientalism is the close study of the third world societies , cultures and languages by western scholars. It was practiced widely by the European colonizers who conquered 80% of the surface of the globe; specifically the Middle East , far East and Africa . Edward Said argues that Orientalism is much more than a field of scholarly investigation ; it is rather 'a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of the time) the “Occident.” ' (Said 25).

The first key concept is Hegemony. According to Robert O. Keohand and Joseph S. Ney definition of hegemony “as a situation when one state is powerful enough to maintain the essential rules governing interstate relations, and willing to do so. In addition to its role in maintaining a regime, such a state can abrogate existing rules, prevent the adoption of rules that it opposes, or play the dominant role in constructing new rules.” (Esakova N.2012:67) Here is an extract that illustrate the Hegemony theory in the novella :

'What has happened to that piece of land in dispute?' asked Okonkwo. 'The white man's court has decided that it should belong to Nnama's family, who had given much money to the white man's messengers and interpreter.' 'Does the white man understand our custom about land?' 'How can he when he does not even speak our tongue? But he says that our customs are bad, ….” (p139)

This quote examines such arising situations in Chinua Achebe’s novel Things Fall Apart (1958) in which the white colonizers weave a cultural hegemony around the natives with the goal of establishing their colonial domination over them either by force or not. The findings of this essay reveal a binary cultural hegemony showing both acceptance and resistance for white man’s cruel dominance.

The missionaries who are the White men spread the Christian to the natives of Nigeria , while their real religion was Igbo and they tried to convert it claiming that this change will help improving the natives knowledge. However, these two religions are quite different. One evidence is that the White men had built a church in the land without giving the natives their right to say NO, they also took the rights of the land authority from the natives, and gave the land to someone who is willing to give much more money to them. The White men said that the native's customs are bad and ridiculous they even ignored them. According to Edward Said, the understanding of Western people about the Orient is uncivilized, savage and bad. The Orientalism in this novel is represented by the White men's attempts to omit the natives identity which was seen as primitive and inferior and convert them into the superior civilized European version.

The second key concept is Binary Opposition. According to Jacques Derrida Binary Opposition in the West is defined in terms of “a violent hierarchy” where “one of the two terms governs the other.” Within the white/ black binary opposition in the United States, the African American is defined as a devalued other. (P. 41. 1992) . Plus, it occurs when the colonizers show that they

are superior to the native community in all aspects: rational, intelligent and civilized. Here is an extract that illustrate the Binary Opposition concept in the novella :

“Mr. Brown's successor was the Reverend James Smith, and he was a different kind of man. He condemned openly Mr. Brown's police of compromise an accommodation. He saw things as black and white. And black was evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the children of light were locked in mortal conflict with the sons of darkness. He spoke in his sermons about sheep and goats and about wheat and tares. He believed in slaying the prophets of Baal.” (p.144)

In Things Fall Apart, the tone of racism that is the differentiation between the White and the Black is definitely found. The White people usually thought the natives as “primitives” or “innate” people. They claim that the Blacks are inferior to them. The attitude of reverend James Smith towards Ibo community is evident enough to support this binary. From his own perspective, Reverend Smith saw things as Black and White and the “Black” as evil. He saw the world as a battlefield in which the ‘children of light’ (White) were locked in mortal conflict with the “sons of darkness’ (Black). Besides, the District Commissioner is portrayed as the prototypical racist colonialist. He thinks that he understands everything about native African customs and cultures as if he was born with them in that land, nevertheless he has no respect for them. His ethnographic study on local African tribes is the idea of embodiment of his dehumanizing and reductive attitude towards race relations.

Ambivalence is the inability of an individual, a group or a culture to ride themselves of ideas, passions or relationships that they nevertheless also claim to condemn or deny. (Breman N.2012:9). This ambiguous relationship in which colonizer and colonized regard one another. The colonizer often sees the colonized as both inferior but exotically other, while the colonized regards the colonizer as both enviable but corrupt. In a context of hybridity, this often produces a mixed sense of blessing and curse. According to Burton “The simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward/from a person or thing.”(2004: 8)

The first key concept is Stereotype. According to Crocker and Luthanen It is defined as an idea that is used to describe a particular type of person or thing, or a thought to represent such an idea and usually this idea is wrong. They hypothesized that subjects who had experienced a threat to their self-esteem would be motivated to activate their stereotypes as a means of making themselves feel better through downward social comparison (1996). Here are some extracts that illustrate the Stereotype theory in the novella :

'Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest, lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper' […] (2.12(

In the Igbo world, men are the dominant sex and they “rule” over their families, including their wives. Women are relegated to a more or less servile position, often living in fear of their husbands. Though Okonkwo’s quick temper with his family is never portrayed as admirable, he unquestionably has the right to be aggressive at home. This is one reason why the colonizers were affected by Okonkwo's offensive behavior toward his family, therefore, they tended to form their own vicious point of view about Okonkwo and the worst is when they generalized that idea to the whole Africans. In fact, Okonkwo is unable to deal appropriately with situations that call for such a balance and so it seems as though he cannot act in any other way but with violence, further supporting the European stereotype of Africans as violent and savage. Another example:

'Unlike his father he could stand the look of blood. In Umuofia's latest war he was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head.' (P10)

Just in case the reader was not aware of the cultural gap between himself and the Ibo, he is introduced to Okonkwo's custom of drinking palm-wine out of a human skull. This short passage shows what Okonkwo values in a man. A man works hard, fights well, and honors the dead by drinking wine from a dead man's skull. Okonkwo is entirely inflexible. He believes that “one is either a man or a woman: there can be no compromise, no composite” (Iyasere 380). The quote extracted above is another reason why The white men (the colonizers) adopted that bad idea about Oknkowo and generalized it to the African men as a whole.

The Second key concept is Mimicry, It is the desire for reformed, recognizable other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite (Bhaba.H:266). Moreover , mimicry as Bhabha explain, it recognizes a similarity and dissimilarity , also shows how the colonized becoming like the colonizer but always remaining different. Here are some extracts that illustrate the Mimicry concept in the novella :

After Nwoye is lured into the Christian religion and abandons his culture and family, Okonkwo is ashamed and states, “you have all see the great abomination of your brother. Now he is no longer my son or your brother. I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people” (P172).

It is extremely obvious in this quote how Okonkwo feels humiliated for his son (Nwoye), he becomes a part of the villagers adaption to the colonizer’s way which is an untraditional path to his culture. As a result Nwoye’s father abandons and disowns him as well. Moreover, he dose not just choose the colonizer religion but also his advancement in the church gets him a new position and becomes a teacher .However at first he was unsure about going to a church , his feelings of loneliness and curiosity had made him go to mass. Nwoye finds comfort and compassion in the new religion more than his old society’s values while the serious, frustrated, and unhappy mood that is created in Okonkwo’s statement gives the reader an idea of how much the Ibo culture values tradition, choice, and family.

To conclude , this presentation displays an overview of Chenua Achebe Things Fall Apart. It also discusses two key concepts of each theory Orientalism and Ambivalence ; Binary Opposition and Hegemony besides Mimicry and Stereotype provided with evident extracts from the novel.

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