Chinua Achebe: Achievements And Social Issues Raised In His Novels

Chinua Achebe, a decorated and well-known African author from Nigeria, who in his debut novel and considered to be his all-time masterpiece wrote Things Fall Apart. His full name being Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born in an Igbo village, in present-day Nigeria on16 November 1930. In his early life the young Chinua Achebe found himself in a cultural crossroads of his traditional ancestral culture/customs and the western Christian influence as his family were converts to the Protestant Church Mission Society. However, the traditions of his native religion were still respected by him and many that converted to Christianity and at times followed by Achebe himself. This had a significant impact on him throughout his life which we would later see this anecdote of his life as a theme in Things Fall Apart. Achebe illustrates through the story a vivid picture of Igbo life through its culture/customs and how it eventually collides in a cultural conflict with the Christian doctrine that arrives in Africa. The novel follows the life of an Igbo man named Okonkwo of the fictional Umuofia clan. The story is divided into three sections: which begins with details Okonkwo's background and Igbo society culture, and through the last two sections is followed by the influence/intrusion of western colonialism through Christian missionaries on Igbo society and their response to it. Things Fall Apart represents great historical literary significance of the intrusion of Western civilization the Christian doctrine in Africa as it has done in other parts of the world, as well as the colonization of the continent by Western civilizations. Through Okonkwo we see a satirical illustration of a overly-masculine man (with masculinity/gender roles being an underlying theme of Igbo society) that is deemed savage and primitive as most African cultures were seen as by Western civilizations and that they needed to be controlled as they lacked structure. Achebe preferred the pre-western culture of Africa but points out through Okonkwo's exaggerated behaviours the weaknesses of the societal structure of Igbo life.

Africa as of today is a continent full of ethnic and cultural diversity, political turmoil and variety of languages/dialects that can all be traced back way before its colonization by Western civilizations. This has led to political, social and literary struggles to define and restore the African identity. Chinua Achebe, who is one of the most famous and recognized contemporary African writers to emerge from the continent, does a fine job in illustrating the African identity through the Igbo people of Nigeria in his bestselling novel, Things Fall Apart. His novel details African Igbo culture in such a vivid and intimate style. One of the main concepts in the novel is the colonization of Nigeria through the invasion of Western civilizations and the Christian doctrine (which he grew up in). In Things Fall Apart he intents to restore a sense of identity and heritage about his homeland by vividly illustrating the traditions of the society of a fictional African tribe/civilization called the Umuofia prior to the arrival of colonizers. But as the novel progresses in which he dedicates a section in which arrives to this African tribe and colonizes which according to the article "The Distortion of Cultural Identity in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart" by ?ule Okuro?lu Özün and Nagihan Ba?kale it states, "the effect of missionaries and administrators on a typical village tribal society; the dislocation that change, religious and educational, brings to historic certainties". An interesting concept that Achebe does in Things Fall Apart is narrate the story through the colonizers language, English, but occasionally throw in words and phrases of his native language. This is to demonstrate a resistance to the colonizers attempt to erase and disparage a culture as it has been done with many other

civilizations in the world and to give representation to those that have been affected by colonization in an elegant manner while also detailing that Africa is diverse trying to erase the ignorant concept of a whole continent being the same.

Although, Achebe gives representation and details Igbo life in an eloquent and vivid manner he also depicts the flaws of its societal structure and how it ultimately relates to its own colonization. Concepts such as blind and devout followings of superstitious beliefs, oppression of women, sacrifices of children etc. Specific examples of these customs are portrayed through Okonkwo's story on how poorly he treats his son, Nwoye, who ultimately seeks refuge in a "friendlier" environment through Christianity and as well as towards his adopted son Ikemefuma (who was ordered to be killed by the Umuofia elders) for whose death he becomes directly and morally responsible for due to his refusal to display compassion towards him because of his stubbornness, fear of appearing weak and blind following of orders, "Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machete and cut him down. He was afraid of being thought weak" (Achebe 61). These were all customs that Achebe portrayed in a negative light while also maintaining that these people were not primitive and savages as portrayed by Western civilization but rather were different than those who colonized them but these customs served as an excuse for the intrusion of the Western world (Ozun and Baskale).

In Things Fall Apart, one of the many interesting themes to analyze in terms of the storyline that provides insight into Igbo society that encapsulates many events that occur in the novel is the theme of masculinity/gender roles. The theme of masculinity/gender roles is a universal concept that is present in various cultures. Okonkwo, the main character, is seen throughout the novel trying to prove his masculinity through a variety of ways. These behaviors and his character is rooted in the resentment he carries towards his father who is described as a lazy, cowardly and gentle man which Okonkwo vowed to not become as he deemed him to be a disgrace. The extent of his hatred towards his father can be seen in the following excerpt, "Even as a little boy he had resented his father's failure and weakness...And so Okonkwo was ruled by one passion – to hate everything that his father Unoka had loved. One of those things was gentleness and another was idleness" (Achebe 10). Achebe who himself was a compassionate and peaceful man integrates the social perception of what it is to be a "man" in Igbo society. What can be interpreted in Igbo Society is that the sexuality of a man is not so much his sexual orientation but rather the level of strength he possesses. If a man was not deemed to be strong they were immediately associated with femininity in a negative way such as in the novel Okonkwo's father was referred to as "agbala" (means woman) by his village.

This anecdote subtly illustrates the subordinate role of women in Igbo society and how they are viewed as second-class. In the novel there is an explicit part that details the oppression of women in which there are moments where Okonkwo severely beats two of his many wives for minor incidents, "He walked back to his obi to await Ojiugo's return. And when she returned he beat her very heavily. In his anger he had forgotten that it was the Week of Peace. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him that it was the sacred week. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of a goddess" (Achebe 17). These events in the novel would show that Igbo society is ruled by a patriarchal system and that the women are treated poorly, which is not very progressive of a society but was common in many cultures even Western civilizations who claimed to be above the rest. However, when one goes in-depth it can be seen that the extreme mistreatment of women it is only through Okonkwo that this happens as it is proven that Okonkwo is a unique case and does not represent the common Igbo man (Dar). This is an interesting concept in Things Fall

Apart as it serves as a pivotal moment in separating the author, narrator and character as Achebe subtly illustrates Igbo women as having an important role in that society. According to Iftikhar Dar in “Gender Stratification in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart”, women are portrayed as wise figures who shape the younger generations by being their caretakers, educators and shaping their behaviors/manners. In the novel despite the patriarchal system that has women functioning in subservient roles and the men having multiple wives, the women fulfill a lot of important duties in order for Igbo society to function. For example, the women alongside the men take charge of the civilization’s agriculture with crops such as melons, beans etc. as well as being held responsible for livestock. Also, they are expected to maintain a stable home with the expectation that meals be served for the men and children without failure as well as caring for their children and guiding them. Achebe’s intent is to portray a complex and dynamic society to a Western society that constantly portrayed African civilizations as savage, primitive and simple which goes back to the concept of the Western world’s intrusion and destruction of colonized lands throughout the world.

In conclusion, Achebe in his masterpiece Things Fall Apart does a wonderful job on defining the African cultural identity in his own terms. He does so by providing a vivid and surreal narrative of Igbo society and culture before the intrusion of Western civilization and the Christian doctrine whom would later portray them as barbaric savages in an attempt to erase their culture. However, he does recognize the flaws of the societal structure of the Igbo through Okonkwo and how it contributed to their colonization but without submitting to the misrepresentation of Africans as uncivilized beings. He also satirizes masculinity through Okonkwo and provides insight to the gender roles of Igbo society on how essential women were to it. Overall, Achebe successfully demonstrates how Western civilizations invaded and colonized Africa for its natural resources under the false pretense of bringing order and structure through the Christian faith when the African tribes were already well-functioning societies who failed at the time to defend their cultural identities that the Europeans sought to destroy.